



THE
MICRO MACHINES
CRIMEBUSTERS III

Fatal Error



Movie mecha,
high-tech trouble,
megabyte mystery!

Three Investigators Crime Busters—11

Fatal Error

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Chapter 1

Welcome To Chao!

BOB ANDREWS MADE A BEELINE ACROSS THE JONES Salvage Yard to the headquarters trailer of The Three Investigators. He was swinging a tennis racket and mentally juggling his heavy schedule.

Spring vacation had just started, and Bob had plans for every minute of it. Right now he needed to squeeze in some time on an overdue history report before keeping a late-afternoon tennis date. Then that evening he had to set up a rock band for Sax Sendler, his boss at Rock-Plus talent agency. Lucky that The Three Investigators had no cases at the moment!

In the grease pit next to the trailer, Bob's fellow Investigator Pete Crenshaw whistled happily to himself. Most of Pete had disappeared beneath the hood of the beat-up van he was repairing. He expected to make a bundle this week when he finished fixing up the van and sold it. Pete didn't want any detective work this week either.

Just then a speeding truck roared in through the open gates of the junkyard. Bob looked around in surprise. Pete jumped up from beneath the hood, almost cracking his head. Who was in such a big hurry?

The truck was one of the yard's own battered pick-ups. Brakes squealing, it halted in a cloud of dust. Browsing customers scattered in alarm. Wild drivers were rare in the biggest and best junkyard in Rocky Beach, California.

"Hey, it's Jupe!" Bob yelled to Pete.

"What's he up to now?" Pete shouted back.

Behind the wheel, the round face of Jupiter Jones was creased with worry. Jupe turned off the engine, jumped out of the pickup, and dashed wordlessly past Bob and Pete toward the trailer. His black hair was mussed, as usual, but his face was ghostly white...Next to starvation, exercise was Jupe's least favorite thing. When stout Jupe ran, Pete and Bob knew something was up. And by the look on Jupe's face, this time it was something really bad.

"Jupe! What gives?" called Pete. Wiping his hands on his

green Yosemite T-shirt, he chased after him. At six feet one and well-coordinated pounds, Pete could, move fast.

“Who’s after you, Jupe?” Bob yelled, running to catch up. Though not a jock like Pete, the tall, slim, blond guy could move plenty fast himself.

Jupe’s broad backside disappeared into the trailer. Pete and Bob pounded in behind him.

The headquarters of the three seventeen-year-olds was its usual jumble. Papers and empty fast-food containers littered the tops of the desk and file cabinet.

The faint odor of yesterday’s anchovy pizza hung in the air.

As the door banged shut, Jupe whipped off the cover to the Investigators’ PC. Not only was he the brains of the guys’ amateur detective agency, he was also an electronics whiz and a hotshot computer programmer. While Bob and Pete watched, Jupe sat down at the computer, flipped switches, and slid two floppy disks into their slots. The PC whirred quietly.

Jupe took a deep breath and stared tensely at the PC.

“Come on, Jupe,” Pete said. “Spill it!” Bob said.

Jupe shook his head and gestured for them to bug off. He wasn’t ready to talk yet.

Bathed in the glow of the PC’s monitor, the Investigators stared as bright amber letters moved across the black computer screen. Jupe typed a request for the computer to show some information.

Bob was growing impatient. “Speed it up, Jupe. I need the PC so I can finish up my history report. The girls will be here any sec.” He flicked the strings of his tennis racket. He and Pete had a tennis date with Elizabeth Zapata and Kelly Madigan. Bob had just met Elizabeth at a downtown record store, and Kelly was Pete’s steady.

“Yikes!” Pete whooped. “Kelly!” He looked down at his T-shirt and jeans. They were streaked with black automotive grease and white primer paint. “I’ve got to change!”

As Pete bounded off toward his pile of clean clothes at the back of the trailer, the PC gave a sharp, high-pitched beep. Instantly three huge words flashed onto the screen: FATAL DISK ERROR!

“What’s that mean?” Bob demanded suspiciously.

“The pits,” Jupe groaned. “We can’t get our information off the disk. But even worse, it’s what I was afraid of...The virus has infected us, too!”

“What virus?” Pete demanded from the back of the trailer. He’d stripped off his T-shirt and was cleaning his hands and arms with naval jelly. “I feel fine.”

“Not a people virus, Pete,” Jupiter growled. His fingers flew over the keyboard again, trying to convince the computer to find some of the information on the disk. “A computer virus.”

Puzzled, Pete returned to stand over Jupe. Each time Jupe tried a new command, the PC beeped ominously, and FATAL DISK ERROR glared out at the guys.

“What’s a computer virus?” Pete finally asked.

“A tiny string of code that copies itself over and over,” Jupiter answered grimly. “It’s really a subprogram that hides inside another computer program or an operating system. Then it eats and scrambles data.”

“Run that by me again,” Pete said, even more puzzled.

“The virus erases information,” Jupe translated. “Or it screws it up so that you don’t know if it’s accurate anymore.”

“You mean it can change numbers and words?” Bob said.

“That’s it,” said Jupe. “Viruses are the worst. Some fill a disk with many nonsense numbers that the computer crashes. Others just randomly ruin data. The damage possibilities are endless.”

“But Jupe, how come we didn’t know we had a virus until now?” Bob asked.

“Do you know the moment you catch the flu?” Jupe asked.

“No.” Bob and Pete shook their heads.

“Same thing happens with computer viruses. It all depends on the design. They can screw up your data right away, or they can sit around for months and then whammo!” Jupe slammed a fist into the palm of his hand. “They spread from one disk to another through the computer. So if you borrow someone else’s disk, you’d better watch out. Your computer might catch one!”

“Wait’ll I tell my math teacher,” Pete said. “Numbers are contagious.”

“I’d like to make this contagious!” Jupe said, shaking his fist. “The jerk who designed this virus probably thinks he’s hot stuff right now. But we’ve lost everything on this game disk. The files are wiped clean!”

Suddenly Bob felt queasy. He grabbed the disk box and handed it to Jupe. “I’ve put blood, sweat, and even a few

broken dates into my history report. Tell me it's okay!"

Jupe turned off the computer and started it again. He slid in Bob's disk.

Bob leaned close to the screen and held his breath. Jupe called up the report file.

Bob's luck was the worst: Beep. FATAL DISK ERROR!

"It's gone," Bob moaned. "I don't believe it. Gone! I'll have to write the whole thing all over again. It was fifteen pages long!"

"Sorry, guy." Pete clapped Bob on the shoulder and pulled up chairs for the two of them. "What can we do, Jupe?"

Jupiter was hard at work. "This is a sector editor," he explained as he waved a disk. "I bought it on the way home. It's like a high-powered magnifying glass. Watch this." He switched disks in the computer.

But Bob stood up and walked away. Pete glanced in his direction and saw him searching through a pile of papers on the bookcase. He looked weirded out.

Pete leaned back over Jupe's shoulder.

"The sector editor lets us look at the data on the disk's rings," Jupe said. "There are a lot of rings—three hundred sixty concentric ones on each disk."

"Like the rings around a CD?"

"Right. And each ring is divided into sectors." Suddenly rows and rows of random numbers and letters flooded across the screen. "That's what we're looking at now—the sectors."

"I don't get it," said Pete. "Am I supposed to be able to read this stuff?"

"Yeah." Jupe groaned as the minutes passed. "We should be able to see my files, regular English words, but there's no data left. It's nothing but garbage! Junk the virus made up. All the data's gone here, too!"

Just then Bob let out an excited yell. "I've got it!" He waved a sheaf of papers. "I thought I printed out a rough draft a couple of days ago, and I did. All I have to do is make my final changes and retype it!"

Bob grinned widely and plopped down beside Pete. "Now I can get back on the vacation track!"

"Yeah, well, get depressed again real fast," Jupe told him. "We still don't know what else is missing. That first disk was just a game, so it's no big deal. But we've still got to see whether we've lost the junkyard inventory...our Three

Investigators data bank...all our case histories..."

"No—o—o—o!" Pete groaned. "That's months of work!" Bob complained. "Especially the yard inventory," moaned Jupe. He'd prepared the inventory for his Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus, who owned the salvage yard. It had taken forever to sort through every pile of junk in the place and list each item.

They all looked in disgust at the garbage on the screen. And then their eyes widened as real words suddenly appeared. They were planted at sector zero, on the disk's innermost ring:

WELCOME TO CHAO! PAY FIVE MILLION DOLLARS, OR YOU AND YOUR DATA WILL BE ERASED!

"Somebody wants us to pay five million dollars?" Pete said, his voice rising with disbelief.

"Or we'll be erased?" Bob cried.

"Guys," Jupiter said grimly, "we're into some big trouble!"

Chapter 2

Invasion of the Data Snatchers

“WHAT IS THIS, JUPE? SOME KIND OF BLACKMAIL?” BOB demanded. “Who’s after us?”

“Somebody who’s gonna be sorry!” Pete growled. “Go slow, Rambo.” Jupiter exchanged disks again to check whether the next one was infected. It was, and he sighed with frustration. “I’m just starting to get a handle on the problem. This all started when a guy from my computer club—Devon Colin—called me a couple of hours ago. He suddenly couldn’t get two of his disks to work.”

“Just like us,” Bob said.

Jupiter nodded. “I went over there. He had a sector editor, so I checked his rings. And right at the zero sector, like on our disk, I found...”

“The CHAO message?” Bob said.

“Yeah.”

“Then the threat’s not aimed at us!”

“Doesn’t look like it,” Jupe agreed. “It was stupid, anyway,” Pete said. “No way could we cough up five mil!”

“I’d have trouble coughing up ten bucks,” Bob admitted. “Can’t wait for payday!” Not that his part-time job at Rock-Plus paid very much besides free admission to clubs and rock concerts. But Bob needed every cent he could get for his social life. With his blond, blue-eyed good looks and magnetic smile, he attracted girls the way rock stars did fans.

“Since both of Devon’s disks were infected,” Jupiter continued, “we figured it had to be a virus. That freaked me out because of a virus case I remembered from a few years ago. It started with a college student who said he designed a virus to prove a national computer network had security problems. But he made a mistake in its design, and the virus went berserk. It crashed six thousand computers and caused almost a hundred million dollars in damage!”

Pete whistled. “Big bucks!”

“You know it.” Jupe nodded. “So I started worrying about where Devon’s virus had spread. One of his disks was

completely erased. It probably had the virus longest and infected the rest of his disks. But if that was right, then everyone in our computer club could have it too.”

“You shared the disk?” Bob asked.

“Yeah,” Jupe said miserably. “It was a game disk, and we all made copies of it. So Devon got on the phone to warn everyone, and I split to check our PC.”

“But where did Devon catch the virus in the first place?” Pete wondered.

Just then there was a tap on the trailer’s door, and a girl’s voice shouted, “Pete! Oh, Pete!”

“Yow!” Pete leaped out of his chair and dashed for the bathroom at the back of the trailer, where he could change. “It’s Kelly. Cover for me!”

“Chicken!” Jupe called after him. He and Bob had long ago decided that Kelly had big Pete wrapped around her little finger.

“You owe us for this one, guy,” Bob called.

“Bob, is that you?” a second girl shouted from outside. “We’re ready for tennis!”

Bob opened the door. He beamed his dazzling smile at the two girls. “Ladies,” he said with a sweep of his hand. “Please come in.”

Swinging their tennis rackets, Kelly Madigan and Elizabeth Zapata trooped through the door. They wore pastel tank tops and little white skirts. Both had tied back their long brown hair with ribbons.

Elizabeth grinned up at Bob. “I’ve been looking forward to this.”

He grinned right back. “Me too.”

“So, where’s Pete?”

Kelly looked around.

“He’s not ready,” Bob told her.

“What!” Kelly’s green eyes flashed.

“But he’s really stressed about it,” Bob assured her. “He’d rather be here with you than anywhere else. Right, Jupe?”

“Huh?” In his mind Jupe saw nasty strings of code gobbling beautiful data. He was separating infected disks from healthy ones by checking for the CHAO\$ message at each disk’s zero sector.

“Well...” Kelly said, amused.

“You know how valuable Pete is in an emergency,” Bob went on, “and that’s what we have—a computer emergency.”

“Pete knows about computers?” Kelly said. “Gee, I didn’t think he knew anything about them. I’m impressed!”

“Hey, Kell.” Pete emerged from the bathroom in a clean white U2 T-shirt and shorts. He ran his fingers through his tousled reddish-brown hair and grinned at her. “Forgive me?”

She slid her arm through his. “Maybe this time!”

“Let’s go,” Elizabeth said, and headed for the door with Bob right behind her.

“Just a second.” Jupiter lifted his head. “I’ve got a body count.”

Bob stopped, his hand on the knob. “What’s the bad news?”

“Two completely erased,” Jupe said somberly, “and partial erasures on three others. The invasion could’ve been a lot worse.”

“What’s he talking about?” Elizabeth asked Bob.

“A lot of work we’re gonna have to do. What’d we lose, Jupe?”

“The game disk and the disk with our most recent case histories. Plus some chunks here and there of the junkyard’s inventory. No point in replacing the game, but the rest...”

“What about the backup disks?” Bob asked hopefully. “I remember you making them.”

“At least once a week.” Jupe pushed away from the console. “But my count includes the backups. It looks to me like everything we worked on in the last week’s been infected.” He opened his desk drawer and took out a fat stack of business cards. He rolled off the rubber band and fished through them.

Bob snapped his fingers. “There goes vacation!”

“There’s one other person I need to contact,” Jupe said, waving a folded paper from the stack. “Norton Rome. He’s a programmer. He was our club’s guest speaker last week. He gave Devon the game disk because that’s what his talk was about—programming a game. His system’s got to be infected too.”

“Call him. Spread the good news.” Bob handed the phone to Jupe.

“I know where he works, but today’s Sunday.” Jupe dialed. “Hope he’s at home.” As the phone rang Jupe opened a jar of chunky peanut butter, stuck in his finger, pulled out a huge gob, and began eating it off. It was his latest crash diet—peanut butter and bananas.

“Peanut butter’s full of calories, Jupe,” warned Kelly. “Bananas, too. Very bad for the figure.”

“They’re high in protein and potassium,” Jupe informed her as he listened to his call ring. “Very healthy.”

“High in carbs and fat,” said Kelly. “Very stupid. Try salads.”

Jupe hung up the phone. “No answer. I guess we’ll just have to go over there.” Jupe licked his finger.

“No, Jupe,” Kelly corrected him with a shake of her head. “We’re playing tennis. You’ll have to go solo.” Her nose wrinkled as she screwed the lid back on the peanut butter jar.

Jupe peeled a banana, then opened the telephone directory. “Can’t. Uncle Titus needs the truck, so I need a lift. Besides, this looks like a case for The Three Investigators.”

“That’s you guys, isn’t it?” Elizabeth said. “I’ve heard of you but, really, what can you do? I mean, you’re teenagers.”

“You’d be surprised at the cases we’ve solved,” Bob assured her. They’d been detecting successfully for several years.

“Yeah, and the gorillas we’ve sent to jail!” Pete spun enthusiastically in a karate yoko-keage side snap kick. He and Bob had learned karate, while Jupe had specialized in judo.

“I’ve got Rome’s address.” Jupiter closed the telephone book and tossed his banana peel toward an overflowing wastebasket. He missed.

“Look at it this way,” Jupe told the girls. “If a virus got into a bank’s computer system, people could lose their life savings. Or if it got into a hospital’s computer system, it could kill patients by messing up the orders for medication. We need to stay on top of this. Maybe Rome can tell us if somebody else used his game disk, and we can track the virus back to the guy responsible.”

“But what about us?” Kelly asked forlornly.

“Bob, I was really looking forward to our date,” Elizabeth said with a sweet smile.

“Sorry, girls, but duty calls,” said Jupiter firmly. “Pete and Bob can’t ignore a line like YOU AND YOUR DATA WILL BE ERASED. That blackmail message means big trouble for somebody!”

“Besides,” Jupe added airily, “this won’t take long. We’ll be back in plenty of time for your game.”

Chapter 3

Close Encounters

Pete's souped-up, baby-blue Dodge Aries squealed away from the passenger-loading curb where Jupe and Bob stood. Since the street was already lined with parked cars, Pete was off to search out another place to leave his wheels.

"That is one hot car," Bob said.

"And one crazed driver!" Jupe laughed. "Come on, let's hit it."

Under swaying palms, Jupe and Bob strode up a wide walkway toward a cluster of rambling stucco garden apartments. According to the telephone book, Norton Rome lived here, and according to the small glassed-in directory that stood next to the sidewalk, his place was apartment 5C.

The guys wove through the complex, passing playing children and Sunday barbecuers in tropical garden settings.

"Hey, Jupe, smell those burgers," Bob teased. "You can't tempt me. Peanut butter and bananas are very filling."

"I'll bet." Bob chuckled. "Like concrete!"

5C was a corner unit about a hundred yards in from the street. Like the other apartments in the complex, it had its own flower-lined sidewalk, redwood porch, and tall entry door.

"Newspapers!" Bob said. "I don't like the looks of this."

Two newspapers lay on Rome's porch. Jupe picked them up. "Saturday morning and Sunday morning."

Bob lifted the mailbox lid. "A gas bill and a computer magazine. Saturday's mail, probably."

"I'd say Mr. Rome is gone." Jupe pushed the doorbell.

"Maybe he's on vacation."

The guys waited, and Jupe pushed the bell again. He pressed his ear to the door to listen. Bob tried to peer in the front window, but the curtains were closed tight. At last the guys looked at each other and shrugged.

"I saw the manager's apartment back there," Jupe said.

"Let's go."

They strode off again. The manager lived in Building 3 in a corner apartment identical to Rome's. Above the doorbell

was a sign that said simply manager. Jupe rang the bell, and instantly a dog started barking.

“That dog sounds big,” Jupe said.

“I’d offer to protect you, but he sounds big to me, too!”

Beyond the door they could hear the trudge of feet and the heavy clatter of long-nailed paws.

“Quiet, Monster!” a woman shouted. “Quiet!”

Jupe and Bob stared at each other.

“Monster?” Jupe said.

The barking quieted, and the door opened just enough to show a pink-cheeked woman with gray hair.

“Yes?” she said. At the waist of her jogging suit a dog’s black nose appeared, followed by a large head wedging into the doorway.

Jupe cleared his throat, his eyes on the enormous head. That dog’s got to weigh one-eighty! he thought. “We’re looking for Norton Rome, one of your tenants?”

Suddenly the door burst wide open and Monster leaped forward. Jupe and Bob jumped away, but they weren’t fast enough.

“Ummmpf!” Jupe fell backward into a bed of pansies, his shoulders pinned by two gigantic paws. Monster’s big, wet tongue slurped up Jupe’s chin, over his nose, and up his forehead.

Bob collapsed with laughter.

“Monster, shame on you!” the woman scolded, tugging on his leather collar.

“Off, Monster!” Jupe tried gamely, but his voice was shaky. He tried desperately to shove the dog away. No luck.

Bob grabbed the leather collar and pulled too. He was laughing too hard to speak.

After one final lick, Monster at last stepped nimbly away. Jupiter got to his feet and tried not to look annoyed.

“Bad doggie!” The woman pointed her finger at Monster. “You go right in the house and stay there!”

Monster lowered his head and trudged to the apartment.

“Some watchdog!” the manager told the guys. “He sounds fierce, but he’s really a baby. The only other time I’ve ever seen him knock someone down was when my niece stopped by. She was eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and Monster went wild. He loves peanut butter!”

Bob broke into fresh guffaws.

“You don’t have peanut butter with you, do you?” she asked Jupe.

Jupe's round face turned bright red. "Not on me," he said. "Now about Mr. Rome..."

"Oh, yes." She returned to the doorway to pat Monster's head. "You're the third person today to ask about him. I wonder why. He's a very quiet man—a little strange, but aren't we all?" She chuckled and scratched Monster's ears.

"Who asked about Mr. Rome?" Jupe prompted her.

"I don't know their names."

"Could you describe them?" Jupe asked quickly. "Tell us when they came?"

She thought. "Well, one came this morning. He was a bald man, very severe-looking, and he had on a business suit. The other man was here not long ago. He had black hair and wore a dark green Windbreaker and white sneakers." She looked down at the high-tops on Bob's feet. "Like yours."

Jupe pondered this information. Other people were looking for Rome. Could it have anything to do with the virus?

"Did they say why they wanted him?"

"They said they were friends of his. Are you friends of his too?"

"Sort of," Bob said. "I mean, he gave a talk once to Jupe's computer club. Do you know where he is?"

"Out of town for a few days. He didn't say where, but I got the impression he'd be back shortly."

The guys thanked the woman and left. Behind them Monster gave a farewell woof. Jupe glanced back, watched the door close, and sighed.

"I thought it was your drop-dead good looks." Bob chortled. "And here it was your delicious peanut butter scent!"

"You want to talk about animal magnetism," Jupe retorted, "let's talk about guys who attract girls like flypaper!"

Jupe turned onto the sidewalk that wound through the complex.

"Hey, where are you going?" Bob demanded. "The street is back there."

"Let's check out Rome's place."

The two guys moved briskly through the long shadows of late afternoon. A cute blond girl in shorts was watering plants on her porch as the guys passed by.

"Hi!" She waved at both of them, but she looked at Bob.

Bob gave her a big smile. "Hi there!" he called.

"Back to Earth, Romeo," Jupe said. "There's Rome's apartment. You stand guard out front. I'll do recon."

"What?" Bob said, his mind still on the blonde.

"Later." Jupe glanced around quickly to make sure no one was watching, then slipped past Rome's porch and down the side of the cottage. It appeared to Jupe that Rome's apartment must extend the full length of the building. There were three windows. He stopped at the first one and peered inside. The living room was a mess! Drawers had been turned over onto the floor, papers were scattered, and a wastebasket had been dumped upside down and its contents searched. What was going on?

Jupe tried the window, but it was locked tight. He strode to the next window. It also looked into the trashed living room, but it was open an inch! Jupe quickly worked the window up, heaved himself onto the ledge, and stepped inside.

Talk about destruction, Jupiter thought. Anyone who complained about the mess in the Investigators' headquarters trailer ought to see this!

Jupe headed for the computer. The cover was a heap on the floor, and the disk box was open. Jupe searched through the disks, looking for the game disk. But it wasn't there. He turned on the computer, popped in a disk, and called up all the files with no trouble. He tried two more disks with the same result. No virus here that he could see. Jupe dropped to his hands and knees and picked through piles of junk on the floor.

As he crawled toward a mound of paperbacks, the floorboards shuddered. He froze, trying to understand what caused the movement.

Suddenly there was an ominous rolling sound of something heavy on wheels.

Jupiter looked up just in time to see an enormous microwave cart hurtling through the kitchen door. It had a clear path through the floor's rubble, and it was bearing down straight at him!

Chapter 4

Bad Timins

HIS HEART POUNDING, JUPITER DOVE FROM THE path of the microwave cart. It thundered past so close that it took his breath away.

Just as the cart crashed into the living room wall, a pair of white high-top shoes pounded past Jupe. A guy wearing a green jacket whipped open the front door and raced out across the porch. By the time Jupe was back on his feet, the figure had disappeared down the walkway.

“Jupe!” Bob appeared in the doorway. “Are you okay?”

“Where’d he go? Did you see him?”

“Only his back,” Bob admitted. “I was looking for you around the side. What took you so long?”

Jupe flung out an arm, gesturing at the trashed apartment. “Searching through this mess.”

“Geez, Jupe.” Bob stared. “Did you have to destroy the place?”

“I didn’t do it, dope. It must’ve been the guy who tried to mash me with that cart.” Jupe told Bob about the attack and his narrow escape. “I remember when Rome came to talk to us, I thought he was kind of weird and arrogant, but he sure knew his computer stuff. Wonder why anyone would want to search his place...unless it had to do with the virus.”

“Come on,” Bob said, eying the open door. “Let’s split before someone else shows up.”

The Investigators quickly locked the apartment and trotted down the winding walkway.

“Did you see the guy’s green jacket and white high-tops?” Bob asked. “It had to be one of the guys who asked the manager about Rome.”

Puffing, Jupiter nodded agreement. “Too bad he saw me before I saw him!”

“Jupe! Bob!” At the sound of Pete’s voice, the guys turned. Pete loped easily toward them.

“Boy, I sure could’ve used you five minutes ago!” Jupiter told his athletic friend.

“Sorry. It was a bummer trying to find a parking place.

What happened?"

Jupiter and Bob filled Pete in as they walked the two blocks to his car.

"But why'd he go after you, Jupe?" Pete said at last. "I mean, did you find something?"

"Nope." Jupe climbed into the back seat. "Must've been a diversionary tactic. You know, distract me so he could split. Sure makes me wonder whether Rome took off to dodge so many visitors."

"His visitors seem to play rough," Bob said as he sat down in the passenger seat next to Pete. "It's a good thing you looked up in time, Jupe. You could've been mildly squashed. That was a pretty big cart."

They drove back to the junkyard silently, each wondering what the intruder had been after...and why.

It was nearing dusk when the Investigators parked in The Jones Salvage Yard.

"Hey! Look at the door!" Pete said, pointing across the yard to their headquarters trailer.

The guys jumped out of the car. Pete and Bob ran ahead to investigate while Jupiter trailed. He'd had enough fast moves for one day.

"It's notes!" Bob realized as they drew closer. Small papers were taped to the door, fluttering in the breeze.

"Kelly!" Pete guessed. "I'm dead!"

"Oh, no!" Bob smacked his forehead. "I forgot Elizabeth!"

Behind them Jupiter guffawed. "Boy, are you two in trouble!"

"Hey, you wanna talk about somethin' real," called the familiar voice of Ty Cassey, Jupiter's second cousin. "Talk cars."

Lean and wiry, Ty was a master mechanic. His backpack was at his feet, and he was leaning over the engine of Pete's Ford delivery van, tinkering. Whenever he passed through Rocky Beach, Ty joined Pete in restoring cars for resale.

"You're back, Ty!" yelled Pete.

"Obviously. Man, you know you got engine pingin'?"

"No!" Pete made a beeline for the grease pit. Then he spotted Jupe's laughing face. "Kelly!" he reminded himself, and turned back to the trailer. Inside he flicked on the lights and dialed her number. The guys heard him say, "Kelly, baby!" Then he slammed the door.

Bob picked notes off the door. "No one plays tennis in the dark, dummy!" he read, "Investigators should

investigate something important—like why they can't tell time!...‘All guys are the worst!’”

The trailer door opened and Pete walked out, whistling. He looked very pleased with himself.

“So?” Bob and Jupiter followed him to the grease pit.

“So, no big deal,” he said. “Tomorrow afternoon I’m taking her to see *Cosmic Trek: The New World*.”

“Brilliant idea!” Bob said, impressed that Pete had thought of it. “Every girl in the world wants to see Hack den Zorn’s new movie. That ought to get me out of the doghouse too.” He headed for the trailer phone.

“So the third movie’s out already?” Ty asked Pete as he climbed behind the van’s wheel. Everyone knew about the megahit science fiction trilogy. The first two films had made Hack and his costar Qute den Zorn hot box-office stars. Qute—pronounced “cute”—was also Hack’s twin sister.

“Me, I’d go just to see Qute,” Pete confided. “She is one be—yoo—tiful babe.”

“Don’t let Kelly hear you say that,” Jupe advised.

Jupe went into his electronics workshop, a shack on the other side of the trailer from the grease pit. He pulled out a stool and sat in the doorway. Closing his eyes, he turned over in his mind the meaning of the CHAO\$ message. Someone was in danger, and it had to be someone with a computer.

The van’s motor roared to life, and Pete stuck his head under the hood. Ty stepped on the gas. Every time he did, the engine pinged. Ty sped around the van to join Pete under the hood.

Just then the trailer door opened, and Bob emerged with a triumphant smile on his handsome face.

“We’re going with you to the movie tomorrow!” he shouted to Pete. “Jupe, you’ve got to come too. Elizabeth has a cousin she wants to set you up with!”

Jupe opened his eyes and rolled them. “I’m busy!”

“Come on, Jupe,” Pete encouraged. “If you don’t bore her to death with the theory of relativity, you’ll have a great time.”

Despite his big brain, Jupiter found girls a huge mystery. “I’ve got to clean up the virus,” he insisted.

“Okay, chicken, but you tell her!” Bob said. “I’m outta here. Got to help Sax with a gig tonight!” Leaving the phone dangling in the trailer doorway, he trotted off toward the junkyard entrance.

Slowly Jupe walked over and picked up the phone. He cleared his throat. "Ah, yes. Hello, Elizabeth."

Pete watched, amused. How was Jupe going to get out of this one?

An idea glinted in Jupe's eyes. "I'd love to go out with your cousin, but the only time I have open is dinner. She's welcome to join me—for peanut butter and bananas." Jupe paused, listening. He smiled. "Of course. I'm very sorry that she doesn't do peanut butter. Maybe next time. Good-bye."

Chuckling, Jupe hung up the telephone and returned to his stool to work on the CHAO\$ question.

Pete laughed and shook his head. Now back to important things—like the van's pinging. He asked Ty, "What's the prob?"

"When fuel and air mix it up, you know, in the engine's combustion chamber, they're s'posed to burn smooth," Ty explained. "But sometimes they don't. Then you get little bursts or explosions. That's what makes the pingin'."

"Will it hurt anything?"

"You bet. Bad detonation can raise the combustion chamber temperatures so high that metals melt and kill the pistons and valves."

"Oh, no!" Pete groaned.

"Relax, man." Ty chuckled. "We're in like Flynn. You were gonna do a tune-up on this baby anyway, right?"

"Yeah," Pete said eagerly. "Do you mean a tune-up will take care of it?"

"Yup. Your ignition timin's off, that's all." Jupe was getting nowhere fast with the CHAO\$ problem. He headed into the trailer to work on cleaning up the Investigators' PC. First he had to purge the system, then boot it back up using the original software. It could take days. After that he'd have to start reinventorying the junkyard. It looked as if they'd lost data on furniture, appliance parts, garden utensils.

Suddenly Bob bellowed across the yard. "Jupe! Pete!"

The guys turned. Bob was running toward them. He looked both surprised and alarmed.

"There's a guy out there," Bob panted. "He's watching the salvage yard! He's got on a green jacket and white high-tops!"

Chapter 5

Disappearing Acts

THE INVESTIGATORS RAN TO THE JUNKYARD EN-trance. They looked up and down the shadowy street. There was no traffic and no one was in sight.

“Where is he?” Pete demanded.

“Down there,” Bob said, nodding toward a pepper tree growing next to a street light.

Suddenly the growl of a motorcycle erupted, then died.

“That’s him!” cried Bob.

The guys ran toward the motorcycle. The man in the green jacket stomped the starter again. This time the engine caught, and he took off.

“Back to my car!” Pete ordered.

The Investigators reversed directions and piled into Pete’s Aries, parked just inside the junkyard. They zoomed away.

“There he is!” Jupe pointed down a side street. But just then the motorcycle veered off around a corner.

Pete sped up to the corner of the next block, where the motorcycle appeared to be heading. He couldn’t wait to get his hands on the guy. He turned the corner.

“We found him!” Bob exclaimed at the sight of the speeding motorcycle. “Good going, Pete!”

The Investigators leaned forward, excited to be closing in on the dangerous stranger. Now they’d get some questions answered.

Then the motorcycle turned again...and disappeared into the middle of the block! Pete accelerated to the spot. He turned too—right into an enclosed public parking lot.

“You sure he came in here?” Bob asked Pete. The parking lot was empty!

“Nowhere else he could’ve gone.” Pete touched the gas pedal, and the Aries rolled forward. The parking lot was eerily quiet.

“Man, this place is a tomb,” Bob said.

“Why can’t we hear his motorcycle?” Jupiter muttered. “Where’d he go?”

At last the Aries reached the opposite end of the lot. The

Investigators were on edge, looking for a motorcycle that was suddenly invisible.

“He’s disappeared into thin air!” Bob exclaimed.

Then, like breaking glass, the motorcycle’s roar shattered the silence. The guys jumped.

“There he goes!” Pete shouted as a streak of light zipped from around a dumpster enclosure and roared behind them back across the lot. The cycle had been hiding in the dumpster’s shadows, its lights off.

Pete raced the Aries in a circle toward the exit. But the street was deserted, and Jupe was dizzy.

“So close,” Bob moaned.

“We haven’t lost him yet!” Pete said stubbornly. “Hang on!”

Pete pressed the gas feed and the souped-up Aries took off, crisscrossing the area’s streets.

“Let’s get that turkey!” Jupe urged, holding his stomach. Maybe he wasn’t dizzy, he decided, maybe he was hungry. He thought longingly of a ripe banana slathered with peanut butter.

Suddenly the sound of a motorcycle again pierced the twilight. The Investigators leaned forward eagerly as Pete raced toward it.

“We’re closing in!” Bob said, excited. The motorcycle sound was a roar.

And then they rounded a corner.

“Oh, boy! Hell’s Angels!” Pete groaned as they came in on the tail end of a pack of motorcyclists. The famous gang members wore leather vests, long hair in ponytails, and tattoos on their arms. They glanced disdainfully over their shoulders at Pete’s souped-up Aries, then resumed their ride as if the guys in the car didn’t exist.

“Good going, Pete.” Jupe shivered.

“Think that about does it,” Pete grumbled as he let the Angels roll far ahead. “We lost Greenjacket, I guess.”

Bob and Jupe nodded.

“I hate to wimp out on you guys,” Bob said, “but I’m going to be late for work.”

Pete turned the Aries back toward the salvage yard and wondered aloud, “Who is that guy?”

The Jones Salvage Yard was closed for the night. Pete dropped Bob off at his antique red Volkswagen beetle, which was parked on the street, and Bob drove away.

Inside the junkyard, light bathed only the grease pit

where Ty was hard at work, finishing the tune-up on the Ford van.

“So what’s the report?” Ty took out a rag and wiped his hands.

As Jupiter and Pete filled Ty in, the three guys headed into Jupe’s electronics workshop. The shack was an even bigger mess than the trailer. Pieces of three dead PCs were spread out on the worktable, surrounded by tools and parts and wires. TV sets, a VCR, tape deck, and stereo system crowded the walls beneath posters of rock stars. Junk-food containers cluttered every surface.

Pete pulled cans of soda from the refrigerator and handed them around. Jupe peeled an overripe banana and spread peanut butter thickly along it.

“What’s that?” Ty asked, astounded.

“Supper,” Jupiter said, and took a huge bite.

Ty rolled his eyes. “His new diet?” he asked Pete.

“Uh—huh.” Pete grinned.

“Man, you’re not gonna lose weight eatin’ that,” Ty advised. “I mean, look who eats peanuts and bananas—elephants!”

Ty and Pete roared with laughter while Jupiter paused in midchew. His round face flushed.

Then Jupiter said calmly, “You know who else eats peanuts and bananas? Monkeys, that’s who. Have you ever seen a fat monkey? No! All monkeys are thin! Sleek, beautifully proportioned, agile creatures.” He took another enormous, contented bite. “So give me a break.”

Ty and Pete brushed empty pizza boxes off the couch and stretched out with their cans of soda. Jupe finished his banana, and then fiddled with a balky keyboard.

“One thin’ you can count on,” Ty said. “This guy Rome and the dude in the green Windbreaker are connected somehow.”

“But we don’t know if Greenjacket is connected to the virus,” Pete reminded him.

“Sure would be terrific to find Rome,” Jupe mused.

Jupiter stared off into space. Suddenly he slid a hand into his pants pocket. He pulled out the piece of paper he’d shown the guys before—the one with Norton Rome’s name and telephone number on it.

“What gives?” asked Pete.

“I forgot that I know where Rome works. See, I put a notice on some of the BBSs around town—”

“Hold it.” Ty lifted a hand. “What’s a BBS?”

“An electronic bulletin board system,” Jupe explained. “You call it up on your computer, and it shows on your screen. It’s a place where computer users leave messages, write letters to each other, share software...and help each other solve computer problems.”

“Okay,” said Ty. “You put up a notice. Why?”

“When our computer club decided to have guest speakers,” Jupe said, “I put up messages asking for volunteers. Norton Rome called to say he could talk about designing computer games—”

“Speed it up, Jupe,” Ty said. “There’s a van out there waitin’ for my TLC. Where does the dude work!”

“The Reasoner Corporation.” Jupiter grinned triumphantly. “Rome mentioned he was a programmer there, and I jotted it down!” He waved the paper again.

“What happened to your photographic memory?” gibed Pete.

“Tomorrow’s Monday,” Jupiter went on, ignoring him. He got out the workshop’s copy of the phone directory and turned pages, looking for the address of the Reasoner Corporation. “Everyone will be going back to work. We can drive over to see if Rome shows up!”

“Yeah,” Ty said. “Hope the dude’s in better shape than his apartment.” He leaned back and tossed his empty soda can into a cardboard box. “Gotta get back to the van. You comin’?” he asked Pete.

“Right with you.” Pete glugged down the last of his soda, and the two mechanics headed for the door.

“That’s weird.” Jupe looked up. “There’s no Reasoner Corporation. In the white or yellow pages.”

“Try information,” Pete suggested.

Jupiter dialed on the workshop extension and asked for the telephone number. As he listened to the operator, he shook his head at Pete and Ty. He hung up. “She shows no entry for it. She’s never even heard of the Reasoner Corporation.”

“Another dead end,” Pete said, disgusted. “How can a guy work for a business that doesn’t even exist?”

“Maybe he lied,” Jupe groaned.

Pete and Ty could only shrug as they went out to the grease pit.

Alone, Jupiter sat for a long time thinking. He made himself another peanut butter and banana, ate it, and at last

shook his head again. He was getting nowhere fast.

Jupiter went over to the trailer and spent the rest of the evening cleaning out the virus's garbage from his PC. Devon called to bring him up to date: Everyone in the club had an infected PC. To try to stop the virus's spread, each would contact the people to whom they'd loaned software.

By the time Jupe quit, it was near midnight. Both Ty and Pete had left long ago, after completing the van's tune-up. Jupe trudged tiredly across the street to the two-story house where he lived with Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus. He couldn't wait to see his comfortable bed. He brushed his teeth and fell exhausted into it.

Soon he was dreaming of a smoothly working PC—no glitches, no viruses, just well-organized data.

And then, suddenly, he heard some strange noise he couldn't identify. He was confused and groggy, still half-asleep and dreaming. His dark room was shadowy. He heard the noise again. Chills crept up his spine. Something was outside!

Chapter 6

No Easy Way Out

JUPITER TOLD HIMSELF TO CALM DOWN. HE TOOK A couple of deep breaths and listened carefully. There it was again! Now he could decipher it—gravel against his second-story window. Who?...

He opened the window and peered down. “Ty!” he said in a husky whisper. “Be right there.”

He padded quickly downstairs and unlocked the front door.

“Hi, cuz,” Ty said, grinning from ear to ear. He was rumpled, red-eyed, and wearing his battered back-pack. Jupe guessed he hadn’t seen a bed that night. Nevertheless, he looked oddly happy and excited. “What’s up?” Jupe said. “You want to sleep here?”

“Naw. I’m outta here. Got to meet a dude in Albuquerque. I just stopped by to let you know I found the Reasoner Corporation. Here.” He handed Jupiter a greasy slip of paper.

“No kidding!” Jupiter was really impressed. “How’d you do it?”

“The name stuck in my head like I must’ve seen it before.” He shrugged. “So I hitched to the other side of town and hiked around till I found it. I remember cruisin’ past it a few months ago when I was tryin’ out a Jag. No big deal.”

“No, really. That’s great. Thanks! Want something to eat before you go?”

“What ya gonna give me?” Ty laughed. “Peanut butter and bananas? Thanks but no thanks!” He hitched up his backpack. “One more thing. Here’s a piece of advice: Good drivers don’t get stuck in the fast lane. See, I don’t know what’s goin’ down at the Reasoner Corporation, but after I spotted it, I got a feelin’ it ain’t good.”

“What did you see?”

Ty shook his head. “Go slow and easy, cuz. The other lanes are good for drivin’ too.” He touched his index finger to his forehead in salute, then slipped away.

Uneasily Jupiter watched his lean, wiry cousin disappear into the street's shadows. Jupe returned to bed wondering what he'd find tomorrow when he visited the Reasoner Corporation. What had spooked Ty? What was this outfit hiding—or hiding from?

The next morning proved long and frustrating for Jupiter. He called Norton Rome's home telephone several times, but no one answered. Then he had to help out Aunt Mathilda in the junkyard. Some hot prospective buyers needed to know right away what sinks the yard had in stock. Unfortunately for Jupe, the sink inventory was included in one of the blocks of computer data—the 2033 to 2092 file—that the virus had eaten.

So while Pete spray-painted his van, Jupe worked through Uncle Titus's pile of sinks, updating the inventory list that had been printed out earlier in the month. There were complete descriptions of bathroom and kitchen sinks—colors, sizes, shapes, dimensions, fittings, manufacturers... more about sinks than he ever wanted to know.

Finally at two o'clock he finished the list and turned it over to Aunt Mathilda. By then the Ford van had a shiny blue paint job, and Pete was cleaning his equipment.

“How much longer?” Jupiter asked as he wiped a sweaty arm across his red face.

“Ten minutes.” Pete looked up. “Why?”

“Gotta grab a bite.” Jupiter headed for the workshop. “Want some?”

“Your gourmet diet? Count me out!”

Seated on a stool in the workshop doorway, Jupe munched happily. This was the most satisfying diet he'd ever tried. Very filling, and he knew the pounds were melting away.

“Yo!” Bob called across the junkyard. “What gives?” He trotted up in jeans and a black Batman T-shirt.

“You got my message?” Jupe licked his fingers.

“Yeah. So where are we going?”

“The Reasoner Corporation.”

“You found it?”

Jupe filled Bob in about Ty's discovery.

“Cool!” Bob said. “A lead! But I wonder why Ty said go slow?”

The three guys piled into Pete's car and zipped off.

“Two hours is the magic number,” Bob reminded Pete. “Remember, we're taking the girls to Cosmic Trek.”

“Relax. No way I’m going to forget this time.” Pete assured him.

“Or you won’t live long afterward.” Jupe chuckled. “That is, if Kelly has anything to say about it!”

“This is from the shy dude who dates only when we make him?” Pete asked Bob. “How’d you get to be such an expert on babes, Jupe?”

Jupiter grinned. “Listening to you two Romeos!”

Twenty minutes later the Investigators found the Reasoner Corporation on a dusty, little-used street in Rocky Beach’s industrial area. The top of an old wooden warehouse, painted gray, showed beyond a tall wall. A faded, painted wood sign just under the warehouse’s domed roofline named the company but gave no information about what it did or produced.

“It looks like the joint!” Pete slowed his Aries in front of the old building. “I mean, it could be Alcatraz!”

The warehouse stood back on a huge parcel that appeared to be completely enclosed by a tall concrete block wall. Rolled barbed wire topped the wall. Nothing but a few trees could be seen inside.

“No wonder this place spooked Ty,” said Bob as they drove by. “Check out the security!”

Pete turned the car, and they coasted past again. The entrance and exits were blocked by solid steel gates that stood two feet taller than the walls. Next to one was an electronic sentry box.

“Uncle Titus’s bank has a sentry arm with an electronic box on the employee parking lot,” Jupiter informed the others as he studied the steel gate. “The only way you can drive in is if you have a plastic employee ID card. You stick the card in a slot, an electronic eye ‘reads’ the numbers, and if you’re for real, the gate opens. Of course, that’s just the entrance.”

“What do you mean, just the entrance?” said Pete. “The bank’s exit doesn’t have an electronic arm or box—just the standard sharp prongs sticking out of the ground. You know, the kind that puncture your tires if you try to drive the wrong way.”

“I’ve got a feeling there’s a point to this,” Pete told Bob. “Come on, Jupe. Give!”

“The Reasoner Corporation,” Jupiter said with maddening logic, “wants not only to keep people from driving in but also from walking in. Otherwise they’d have a

prongs-in-the-ground exit. Instead they have these big steel gates coming and going.”

“Sure. With an open security exit,” Bob figured, “people can just walk around the prongs to get in.”

“Right.” Jupe nodded, peering toward the gate and its electronic sentry box. “Probably there’s an intercom on the box for outsiders to try to talk their way in. But you get the message from the tight security and the out-of-the-way location that the Reasoner Corporation does not want visitors.”

“What kind of work do you suppose they do?” Pete wondered.

“Check in on the intercom and ask,” Bob said. “Be my guest!”

“No thanks.” Pete shook his head. “I wouldn’t be surprised if the guards here carry Uzis!”

As they passed a stand of eucalyptus trees, Jupe said, “Park in there. It’s good cover.” No curb blocked the street, and behind the trees was an open field.

“Cover for what?” Pete said. “A break-in? You go first, Jupe. I’ll lend you my wire cutters.”

“Big of you.”

Pete parked in the field. The Investigators got out of the car and slipped among the tree trunks. Bark crunched under their feet, seeming very loud on the silent street. From the trees they stared at the prison-style warehouse.

“Maybe they do something illegal,” Pete said.

Bob said, “Yeah. Maybe it’s a weapons dump for terrorists...or a factory for illegal drugs.”

“Or maybe...” Jupe said slowly, “all the security is designed not only to keep people out but also to keep them in.”

The grim meaning of Jupe’s latest idea started to sink in. Then suddenly shouts and cries erupted behind the Reasoner Corporation’s wall.

“Help! Help!” Pleading voices floated across the street.

The Investigators were too stunned to move.

Anguished cries rose again.

Pete snapped into action. “Someone’s in trouble in there!” He ran to the trunk of his car, where he kept his tools.

For a moment Jupiter thought about Ty’s warning to take it easy, not to rush in. But Pete raced past, wire cutters in hand, and Bob was right behind him.

“Please help us!”
Jupiter dashed after his friends.

Chapter 7

Gross Encounters

THE INVESTIGATORS BARRELED ACROSS THE STREET. Fresh pleas for help sounded from the Reasoner Corporation. The guys jumped up and grabbed the top of the six-foot-tall concrete block wall. Pete and Bob hauled themselves right up, and Pete immediately clipped open the barbed wire.

As Jupiter at last reached the top, a pitiful voice cried, “No! Help us!”

“It’s coming from there!” Pete shouted. He pointed at an open garage-size door in the old warehouse.

The guys jumped off the wall and raced across a lawn toward the door. Pete got there first and skidded to a halt in the doorway. Bob and Jupiter slid in next to him. The Investigators stared at the weird scene in the barren two-story room.

Two human-size brown lumps spotted with green fungus writhed across the concrete floor. Slithering with them was an inky black blob smeared with slime. “Oh yuk!” Pete said. “Gross!” Bob agreed.

Suddenly the three things rose up on human legs that were encased in tights colored to match each costume. Alarmed, the things huddled together.

“No!” screamed one. “No, no!”

“Save us!” screeched a second.

They were the voices the guys had heard outside!

Just then a big cylinder of Hallenbeck’s Space Age Scouring Powder danced into view. It sang in a deep bass voice:

The dirtiest dirt is always hurt by Hallenbeck’s Scouring Powder. If you want your house clean, you’ve gotta be mean with Hallenbeck’s Scouring Powder!

As soon as it finished the song, the cylinder bent over, aimed its top, and exploded clouds of white powder onto the whimpering dirt clods.

“Out of sight,” Pete said in awe.

At that moment an enraged voice bellowed behind the

Investigators. "This is a closed set! What do you think you're doing busting into a rehearsal!"

The guys turned. A short man with a whistle dangling from his bull neck pushed them aside and strode into the warehouse. "You step out to answer a question, and look what happens!" he muttered as he picked up a wall telephone and dialed. "Security!"

As he talked into the telephone, the dirt clumps and the scouring powder encircled the Investigators.

"How'd you guys get in?" asked the first dirt clod curiously.

"We never have visitors," explained the second.

"That's right," the third added. "Not since the last batch of kids broke in and stole the old Grim Speaker masks and capes out of the garbage."

Like E.T. and Batman, the Grim Speaker was a classic character loved by millions of viewers around the world. The difference was that the Grim Speaker appeared not in entertainment movies but in commercials to save the environment.

"Wait a minute," Jupiter said. "What do you guys have to do with the Grim Speaker?"

"Our company made him. He's manufactured, acted, and filmed here."

"I don't get it," Jupe said with a puzzled frown. "I thought Oracle Light and Magic owned the Grim Speaker. They're in L.A."

"That's us!" said the first dirt clod proudly. "We moved. We're Oracle Light and Magic!"

"You're the famous special-effects company?" Bob cried. "You did *Cosmic Trek*!"

"Harold, put a clam on it!" a baldheaded man in a business suit warned the dirt clod. He had come in through a door at the back of the room. Now he studied the boys through the wire-rimmed eyeglasses on his severe, lined face. Jupiter had a sudden feeling he should know him.

Meanwhile the short man with the whistle ran to keep up with the one in the glasses. "Throw them out!" he said, pointing at the Investigators.

"Who are you?" the severe-faced man demanded as he closed in. "You'd better have a good reason for being here, or your next stop will be jail."

The scouring powder leaned toward the Investigators. They backed away quickly, remembering the white spray

that had erupted from its top. But the powder simply wanted to talk. "Meet Silas Ek," it said. "Chief of security. And Cole Paciano, our director."

Jupiter took in the situation quickly and said smoothly, "Mr. Ek. Just the man we wanted to talk to."

In a crisis, Jupe often drew on his childhood acting experience. Now he slipped into the role of a polished diplomat, introducing the guys and describing the cries for help they'd heard.

"We rushed in to the rescue," Jupe said, laying it on thick. "We thought we were heroes, but it seems instead we were trespassers!"

The Three Investigators and the costumed actors laughed.

Silas Ek didn't. "What were you doing outside?" he growled.

"As a matter of fact, we were looking for one of your programmers," Jupe said. "Norton Rome."

"Nort!" the first dirt lump said. "Now that's one wacky guy. I mean strange. He's the one who..."

"Harold!" Silas Ek warned.

"Oops! Sorry, Silas." The dirt clod backed away.

Cole Paciano, who had been impatiently watching the proceedings, stuck the whistle in his mouth and blew. "Back to work!" he ordered.

As the actors scurried to the center of the room and resumed their roles, Silas Ek studied the Investigators once more. Ek's face seemed even more severe, the lines deeper. Jupe sensed he'd hit a nerve with Norton Rome's name, and it was making Ek change his tactics. The security chief became friendlier.

"Come with me," he invited. "We'll talk in my office."

"Great!" Pete said, pleased. "Can we see some of Oracle Light and Magic? You guys are fantastic. Wait till I tell Kelly —that's my girlfriend!" And he'd blow his dad's mind too. Mr. Crenshaw was in special effects himself, though nothing as high-octane as Oracle.

"That's just what we don't want," Ek said as he led the Investigators through the rehearsal hall's door and down a corridor. Glass-windowed offices lined one side, while fire extinguishers and photos of famous Oracle creations dotted the other. "We moved here to get away from notoriety."

"That's why you operate under a false name, the Reasoner Corporation?" Jupe asked.

Ek nodded. "In L.A. we had to have guards everywhere to

keep people from sneaking in and stealing souvenirs.' We don't want the public to know where we are now."

"We heard about the Grim Speaker stuff," Bob told him.

"That was the final straw," Ek agreed.

On Jupiter's left, rows of computers crammed an enormous glassed-in room. The sign on the door said computer graphics department. All but three of the computers were dark, but at those three, programmers hunched over their keyboards, working feverishly. Jupe stopped abruptly to stare at the screens. They were filled with nonsense numbers and letters—garbage!

Bob, who had been following Jupe, bumped smack into him. Stout Jupe hardly budged, so intent was he on what he saw.

"Come on, Jupe," Bob complained. "Get the lead out."

"Keep moving," Ek insisted.

Jupe asked Ek, "Oracle does a lot of computer graphics?"

"One of our specialties," Ek said, increasing his pace so that the guys had to trot to keep up, "The animated computer graphics on *Cosmic Trek* set the industry standard. Everyone thinks computer animation started with the first *Star Wars*. But all computers did then, basically, was figure angles and speeds for the cameras to film miniature models of spaceships, floating cars, and so forth."

"I've seen that movie eighteen times," Pete said. "At least. I thought all the spaceship battles were animated on computers!"

"That's what everyone thinks. But no drawings were animated. They just shot models."

Ek climbed a flight of stairs up to a wide landing. There a full-length painting of a smiling woman in a fashion spacesuit peered down on them.

"Hey, isn't that Phyllis Hyem?" asked Jupe.

"The lady who founded Oracle!" Bob said.

"She's famous," added Pete.

"Yes, that's Ms. Hyem." Ek opened the first door on the left. They entered a long office with a picture window on one side that looked out over the Oracle complex. Ek had a good view of the small buildings and sheds that dotted the grounds. A dozen security monitors covered the far wall of the office. They showed views of Oracle's exterior, studios, and production rooms.

"You guys really stay on top of things in security," Bob said, impressed with the monitors.

“Sit down,” Ek said pleasantly, and gestured at three canvas chairs in front of his desk. He sat down behind his desk, facing the guys and the video monitors.

“You asked about Nort Rome,” the security chief said. “Mind telling me why?”

“Sure,” Jupe answered. “He came to talk to my computer club and left behind something I want to return. But he wasn’t home yesterday or today.”

“He’s on an extended vacation,” Ek said promptly. “Why don’t you leave whatever it is with me? I’ll see that he gets it.”

“You don’t want what he left behind!” Pete warned the security chief.

“Not unless you want a computer virus!” Bob added.

Jupiter nodded. “But it looks to me as if Oracle’s already infected with a computer virus.”

“What?” Bob and Pete said. Silas Ek frowned angrily and picked up a paper-weight in the shape of a Cosmic Trek laser gun. “Aren’t you going off the deep end, young man?”

Jupe went on logically. “Your whole computer graphics department is closed down, even though you’ve got probably the busiest one in the nation. The only three computers that you’ve got on aren’t working—their screens are filled with the same junk that’s on our PC at home.”

Silas Ek stood up. “Our discussion is at an end. Let me warn you that Oracle can file trespassing charges against you anytime we wish. If we hear you’ve told anyone about our location or about any alleged ‘computer virus,’ we will be forced to do exactly that...”

Just then Ek’s eyes widened behind his wire-rimmed spectacles. He stared unspeaking over the heads of the guys at the bank of security monitors.

The Investigators turned around. Sparks were shooting out from the monitors. Loud crackling and snapping noises followed.

Pete saw smoke billow toward them.

“Fire!”

Chapter 8

A Space(ship) Odyssey

PETE RAN FOR THE DOOR, “I SAW FIRE EXTINGUISHERS downstairs!” Silas Ek grabbed his telephone and punched buttons. “Maintenance? Ek here. I’ve got an electrical fire! Cut off the power and get up here with fire extinguishers!” As the lights went out, Ek called the Rocky Beach Fire Department.

Suddenly a few fingers of flames licked out from the video monitors.

“Uh—oh!” Bob said, sweating. “Every monitor’s hit!” Jupe cried. “Why would they all catch fire at the same time?”

“Who cares?” Bob said. “We’ve got to put out the fire before we turn into fried chicken!”

Pete slammed back in and tossed extinguishers to Bob and Jupe.

Jupe checked that they were dry-chemical fire extinguishers—the kind to use on burning paper, wood, textiles, liquids, gases, vehicles, and, most especially, electricity.

The three guys pulled the extinguishers’ safety pins, pressed down the top levers, and aimed the high-velocity streams of powder.

Just then the Oracle maintenance crew burst in with their own extinguishers. They lined up with the guys and smothered the blaze with a thick blanket of dry chemicals. At last the fire was dead.

“Those monitors look like they’ve been in a blizzard!” Pete laughed with relief. The white powder mounded over the monitors like snowdrifts.

“Thanks, fellows,” the crew chief told the Investigators. “You caught the fire before it spread into the building’s support timbers.”

As the crew chief moved his men out to fetch their cleanup equipment, Silas Ek phoned the fire department and told them to call back their engines.

When Ek hung up, Jupe suggested, “Now why don’t you

phone downstairs for the head of your virus control team?"

Ek's eyebrows shot up. "Now you look here, young fellow. I don't..."

But Jupe went on. "I read in Science magazine about a virus that interfered with the scan controls on two monitors and set one of them on fire. Maybe whoever planted the virus in your graphics computers also planted another one in your video security system."

Ek's severe face suddenly paled as he realized what Jupiter was saying. He picked up his phone. "Send Natalie Jordan up. I want her to do an autopsy on my video monitors." He explained about the fire and Jupiter's virus theory, and he hung up.

"Look, Mr. Ek," Jupiter said sincerely. "I understand your problem. When companies are hit by a virus, they don't want any publicity about it."

Ek nodded his bald head and sighed. "Yes. It's especially bad for a company that relies heavily on computers, like us. It could hurt our image. Investors might lose faith in us, and that could make our stock plunge."

"You can trust us not to talk," Jupiter assured him.

"Right, guys?"

"Right!" Pete said.

"Not even if someone bribes us!" Bob exclaimed.

"How about if it's a foxy girl?" Pete inquired.

"Wel—l—l," Bob said, pretending to think.

Ek started to look upset.

Jupiter whacked Bob's back. "Ignore them, Mr. Ek. They're always making dense jokes."

Silas Ek tried to smile, but he was too worried. Just then the maintenance crew hustled in with mops and buckets.

"Let's get out of here," Ek said. Now that he had admitted to the guys about the virus, he seemed more relaxed. "Let me give you a real tour of Oracle. After you risked your lives, the least I can do is trust you to keep our corporate secret about the virus."

"Hey, great," Pete said. "Does this mean I can tell Kelly?"

"Sorry, Charlie," Silas Ek said, grinning. "That far I don't go."

The security chief led the Investigators down the stairs and into another corridor that extended beyond the computer graphics one. Again one side was lined with glass windows.

"These are production rooms," Ek explained. "This first

one is the Matte Room, where our artists paint fake backgrounds to use in some of the movies and commercials we do.”

On the other side of the glass, painters were creating a black outer-space sky with silver stars and planets, a golden sunset that looked very real until the guys noticed that two suns were setting, and the pearly interior of a nautilus shell.

“That looks like the Forest of Mythology from Cosmic Trek!” Pete said excitedly as he studied a ceiling-high canvas. Populated with vegetation that grew naturally to resemble ancient Roman gods and goddesses, the forest had appeared in the first two Trek films. “Didn’t you guys win a visual-effects Oscar for the Cosmic Trek movies?”

“Yup,” Silas Ek said. “We’re getting the forest ready for a spin-off we’re shooting now, and we hope to win Oscars for it and for this year’s Cosmic Trek, too.” He led them to the next room, “Here’s the Model Shop.”

Inside, workers designed, carved, sewed, and painted miniature spaceships, cars, swords, and even fruit.

“Why do you have to make them so small?” Bob asked. He leaned over to stare at a cluster of tiny musical instruments—guitar, bass, drums, and sax.

“Because they’re going to have to move through space. The car and swords levitate in a movie, while the fruit flies through time in a TV commercial.”

“You do a lot of commercials?” Jupe asked curiously.

“They’re a big part of our business,” Ek said. “To give you an idea, the U.S. spends about two billion dollars annually making commercials, and more are filmed here in the L.A. area than anywhere else, including New York.”

“So we’re top banana instead of the Big Apple,” Bob joked as they moved on.

“Hey, scope this out!” Pete said, amazed, as he gazed into the last room.

Bob feasted on the sight of fabulous monsters, extraterrestrials, and other nonhumans of every size and shape. He told Ek, “No wonder you had problems with people breaking in to steal stuff!”

“It’s a real fantasyland,” Ek agreed. “We call it the Creature Room. Here’s where our artists create monsters and grotesques.”

“There’s the Grim Speaker,” Jupiter said. “See him, guys? He’s behind the gorilla with the parrot’s beak.”

Fascinated, the Investigators studied the popular

environmental spokesman. Tall and angular, the Grim Speaker wore his usual long green cobweb robe. He had big strong human hands and a cat's soft whiskery face.

"He looks alive," Pete said. "Like he could talk any minute!"

"Good," Ek said, pleased. "That means we're doing our job. Now I've got a real treat for you." He led them outside onto a sidewalk that wound around sheds, garages, and film lots.

"Check it out!" Pete said as he looked up at a bullet-smooth spaceship nearly three stories tall. It was coated with silver metallic paint and shimmered invitingly in the sun. Encircled by a low fence, the ship stood at the back of the Oracle lot. Tall, thick trees hid it from the street.

Just then a loudspeaker boomed. "Silas Ek! Silas Ek! Please return to your office!"

Ek smiled at the guys. "Maybe Natalie Jordan has some news for me about the monitors. You three go on into the spaceship. We built it for that spin-off we're filming. See if you can figure out what its role will be!"

Ek walked briskly back toward the warehouse, and the Investigators continued on past a shack to the beautiful ship. Workers passed by carrying costumes and pushing dollies stacked with lumber.

"You know, Pete," Bob said, "I think Jupe's losing his marbles."

"Whoever said he had any in the first place?"

"Okay, guys," said Jupe. "What's your problem?"

"Norton Rome," Bob said, "I thought we came here to find him. How come you let Ek off the hook about Rome?"

"I didn't." Jupiter corrected him. "I'm reeling Ek in right now. Look, it was a big deal for him to admit Oracle's infected with a virus."

"True," Pete agreed.

"And now Ek's taking us on this tour not just to thank us but because he wants information from us."

"What can we tell him?" Bob asked.

"Not much, but he doesn't know that," Jupe said. "I'm hoping we'll learn something from him instead. Don't you see?" He looked at them, his eyes shining. "Ek fits the description the apartment manager gave us for one of the guys who was asking about Rome."

"Right!" Bob smacked his forehead. "Man, am I dumb. Business suit, baldheaded, and a severe face. I forgot! But

why is he looking for Rome?"

"That is the question." Jupe said.

"Probably worried just like us," Pete suggested. "I mean, Rome works for the company."

"Maybe," Jupe said as they tromped up the ramp to the rocket ship.

"What else could it be?" Bob asked.

The guys stepped inside the tall silvery craft.

"Major disappointment!" Bob said as the Investigators gazed up the hollow wood interior. "Where's the high-tech equipment, the laser guns, the holograms?"

The walls were unfinished wood, and the only structure inside was a narrow wood staircase that zigzagged up to an open loft.

"Good question," said Pete. "But shooting interiors here would be a nightmare. There's no room." He looked up. "There still might be a control panel or something in the loft." He took the stairs two at a time, Bob right behind and Jupe trailing.

But as they neared the top, the stairs seemed to shudder. The guys quit climbing and held on to the rail.

"Hey, Bigfoot," Jupe told Pete. "You started a chain reaction."

"Naw, it's an earthquake," Pete said.

The shuddering increased. The staircase began to sway... because the walls were trembling!

"Earthquake for real!" Pete bellowed.

"I'm out of here!" Bob shouted as the Investigators raced downward.

Above and around them, metal groaned and wood ripped.

Jupe glanced up. "The loft's coming down!"

It was sagging, ripping out from the rocket's sides.

The guys leaned away, and with a hot whoosh of air, the loft crashed down past them.

"Close call!" Jupe said, relieved, as the Investigators started down again.

But the groaning and ripping sounds increased above them.

Jupe looked up again, and what he saw made his stomach hollow with fear. "The whole ship's collapsing!" he cried.

Chapter 9

A Flash of Green

GRIPPING THE RAIL, THE INVESTIGATORS RACED down the staircase. It swayed back and forth like a cobra. Suddenly it gave a mighty jerk.

“Jump!” Pete bellowed.

The guys leaped to the floor. With a crash the staircase fell down in a splintered heap. The guys tore for the doorway as dust and a hail of debris sprayed outward. Coughing, they dashed out into the clean, warm air.

Stunned Oracle workers had gathered to watch the tall silver ship collapse in on itself. They rushed over to the Investigators.

“You were in there?” one asked, astounded.

Before they could answer, Silas Ek called their names. The crowd around them parted.

“Are you all right?” Ek asked as he strode up to them. His face was pale with worry.

The guys gave a once-over to their bones and muscles.

“It’s okay. We’re fine,” Pete announced, and the gathering applauded.

Jupe turned to Ek. “Obviously the rocket was rigged to self-destruct, but why did it do it while we were inside?”

“It was supposed to fall apart on camera,” Ek explained. “Not on you fellows. We’re really very sorry.” Relief showed on his face as he explained to the guys what he thought had happened. He touched an on/off switch embedded in the wood post of the low fence. “Our stunt people had threaded aircraft cables through the studs of the rocket’s walls. This switch turned on a winch. It tightened the cables until they sheared off all the nails holding the walls together. Then, one by one, pieces of the ship fell in—but they were supposed to do it in the movie.”

“Who flipped the switch?” Jupe asked.

Ek frowned. “Probably someone who didn’t realize that the switch was connected to the rocket.”

Jupiter pointed to the sign above the switchbox, which clearly spelled out its purpose. “Hard to believe someone

could be so stupid.”

“It happens,” Ek said. “People get tired...or careless...or they’re just fooling around. Don’t worry—Oracle will be happy to pay any medical expenses.”

Jupiter sighed. “All we’ve got is a few scratches.”

Ek wasn’t going to admit that someone had it in for the Investigators, Jupe thought, and maybe Ek was right. Maybe it was an accident.

“You’ll be happy to know you were right about my video monitors,” Ek said, changing the subject.

“There was a virus in the system that affected the scan control.”

“Thought so,” Jupe said grumpily.

Just then the cleanup crew arrived and went to work on the rocket’s rubble. The Investigators glanced around. Now that the excitement was over, the crowd was wandering off to their jobs.

In the midst of the throng Jupe spotted the back of a green jacket. Could it be the guy who’d shoved the microwave cart at him in Rome’s apartment?

Instantly he yelled, “Wait!” and raced away after the guy.

“What’s going on?” Silas Ek shouted after Jupe.

“We’ll be back!” Bob assured Ek, and he and Pete took off after Jupe, although they couldn’t see who or what Jupe was chasing.

The guy in the green Windbreaker glanced back over his shoulder and spotted Jupiter. His eyes narrowed angrily, and he dashed away around a building.

Jupe was puffing, but he put on a burst of speed to catch the guy. Just then a rack of clown costumes was pushed across the sidewalk. Eyes on the green jacket, Jupe never saw the rack.

Jupe and the clown suits collided.

“Yo, Mr. Graceful!” Bob hooted.

Bob and Pete glided to a stop next to Jupe lying on the ground. Jupe pulled ruffled collars off his face and peaked hats from his chest. He propped himself up on his elbows, his head spinning.

“Jupe, you’ve got to quit clowning around!” Pete said “Get it? Ha—ha!”

Jupiter was in no mood for jokes. He swore. “I almost had him!”

“Who?” Bob asked. “Greenjacket!”

“He’s here at Oracle?” Pete said, surprised. “Who’s here?”

Silas Ek asked. Jupiter hauled himself up on his feet and told Ek about their experiences with the man in the green jacket. “Maybe he’s the one who threw the switch. He almost creamed me yesterday with a microwave cart!”

“But you didn’t see his face yesterday,” Ek said. “Correct?” Jupe had to nod.

“Then how can you be sure this man is the same one? And how am I supposed to know who he is? Most of our employees and visitors dress casually, and we’re a big company. There could be fifty men here today wearing green jackets. And quite honestly, if someone were chasing me, I might run too!”

Silas Ek was being logical again, Jupe thought, and the Investigators were getting nowhere fast.

“Okay,” Jupiter said, trying a different tack, “Let’s talk about Norton Rome. What was the guy doing in Rome’s apartment?”

Silas Ek took a deep breath. As Jupe had noted earlier, Norton Rome’s name seemed to make Ek nervous.

“What are you, anyway?” Ek asked. “Detectives?”

“As a matter of fact,” Jupe said, “we are!” He handed Ek a Three Investigators business card.

THE THREE INVESTIGATORS
“We Investigate Anything”

Jupiter Jones Founder
Peter Crenshaw Associate
Bob Andrews Associate

Ek read the card and flicked it with his thumb. “So you’re investigating Nort?”

“His disks infected our system with a computer virus. Now you’ve got a virus. We’re worried it might’ve spread all over!”

“Yes,” Ek said thoughtfully, “I can see you’re worried. But I can tell you with certainty that our virus has gone nowhere else. You’d best concentrate on whom you’ve infected.”

The security chief pulled out his wallet, and a slip of paper fell from his pocket. Jupe picked it up while Ek slid the Investigators’ card in with a stack of others in his wallet.

Jupe started to hand the paper to Ek. Then he spotted three words: WELCOME TO CHAO\$!

“Give that to me!” Ek demanded, and grabbed the paper back.

Jupe didn't need the paper to complete the message.
WELCOME TO CHAO\$! PAY FIVE MILLION DOLLARS, OR
YOU AND YOUR DATA WILL BE ERASED!

Jupiter stared at the angry Silas Ek. Suddenly all the weird and violent events made sense!

Chapter 10

Seeing Stars

BOB STARED AT JUPITER. "WHAT'S UP, JUPE?"

"Guys," Jupiter said slowly, "I know what the connection is between our virus and Oracle's virus."

"What?" Bob demanded.

Jupiter explained, "You remember that message on our PC...the one that demanded five mil? Well, it wasn't meant for us—it was meant for Oracle!" He faced the security chief. "And Mr. Ek is nervous every time we ask about Norton Rome because it's Rome's message. Norton Rome is blackmailing Oracle for five million dollars!"

Silas Ek glowered. "That's ridiculous, young man." Jupe shook his head. "Then why'd you go looking for Rome at his apartment?"

"What makes you think I did?" Ek snapped. "The apartment manager described you," Jupe said. "Look, sir, I've read about programmers blackmailing their employers, and that's what Rome's got to be doing to Oracle. He wants five million or his virus will wipe out your computer system. We probably have the same virus you do. Rome must've transferred it and the threat to our game disks, but I don't know why."

"Maybe it was an accident," Bob said. "It's easy to copy something and not know it. I've done it and not noticed for days!"

Jupe asked the security chief, "What's Rome promising in return if you pay the blackmail money?"

Silas Ek's face was ashen. "I suppose I'm going to have to tell you." He sighed. "It's not a matter of if. It's when we pay the blackmail. We can't afford to lose any more data. If we give Rome the money, he'll give us the antidote to the virus."

"Antidote?" Pete looked questioningly at Jupe. "A program to erase a specific virus," Jupe explained. "See, there are antidotes around to fight known viruses. But since Rome made up his own, no one else knows it. He's the only one who can kill it now."

“What a mess,” Bob said.

“Yes,” Ek said glumly. “You’re smart young men, but I have to ask you to back off on this. Forget Rome.”

“No way!” Pete cried.

Ek shook his head. “You can’t help Oracle, but you can hurt us by attracting the press or screwing up the deal. If we pay off Rome, we can get back to work. We’ve kept this secret, even from most of our employees. Please promise not to tell anyone...and not to interfere.” Just then a young woman’s voice called across the Oracle grounds. “Si—lasss! Si—lasss! Look, Hack. There he is!”

The little group turned. And the Investigators stared, stunned, as the two famous Cosmic Trek stars—red-haired Hack den Zorn and blond Qute den Zorn—walked toward them.

“It’s...it’s...” Bob tried.

“Y—y—yeah...” Pete stammered.

Silas Ek shook hands with Hack, who was six feet five and dressed in doublet and tights. Big-jawed and muscular, Hack wore a sword in a jeweled scabbard at his side.

“Qute and Hack are here to film a soft-drink commercial,” Silas Ek explained. He introduced the eighteen-year-old twins to the Investigators, whom he described as visitors. Jupe decided that shaking Qute den Zorn’s hand was something he wouldn’t mind doing again.

“We’re early,” Qute said, and swished her long velvet skirt. “Hack got the time wrong, and he made me hurry so much I forgot my biology book. Life!” She gave Ek a kiss on the cheek.

The Investigators couldn’t take their eyes off her. Her pale corn-silk hair fell loose to her bare shoulders. She was nearly six feet tall and had an elegant, high-boned face. But why was she worried about a biology book?

As if she could read the guys’ minds, Qute explained.

“Now I can’t study between takes, which is bad news ‘cause my tutor’s scheduled a big test tomorrow,” Qute smiled a frustrated smile.

“I told you, no sweat. You’ll ace it easy.” Hack turned to the Investigators and said, “You wouldn’t believe her memory. It’s like a data bank. And she reads everything!”

Qute rolled her eyes.

Silas Ek grinned. “Qute’s a brain. But she’s quiet about it.”

“Not my idea,” said Qute to the Investigators. “It’s our

publicist. He's convinced it'll ruin my image if people know I'm smart."

"He could be right," said Hack cautiously.

"Nuts! Why should I stifle myself for an image? I swear, I'm going to drop out of Hollywood and go to college."

"Qu—ute," groaned Hack. The Investigators could tell that the twins had had this discussion many times before.

"Seriously," Quite went on. "I wouldn't be the first star to do it. I can always make movies in the summer."

"And your fans will wait for you!" Bob said loyally.

"But who's gonna believe you're a helpless princess on the screen when you're cramming biology the rest of the year—and your hobby is collecting weird science facts?" teased Hack.

"You collect facts too?" said Jupe without thinking. Then he blushed, embarrassed.

Quite turned her blue eyes on Jupe and studied him hopefully. "All the time," she said. "Like: A teaspoon of seawater has as many molecules in it as there are teaspoons of water in the Atlantic Ocean. That's from *The Odd Book of Facts*."

Quite looked at Jupe expectantly.

"Go on, Jupe," urged Bob. "Say something. She isn't the only one who reads encyclopedias!"

"Yeah," added Pete. "Show her your photographic memory!"

Jupiter seemed to come to life. He was shy around girls, but never around facts. "How about this?" he asked Quite. "Saturn has such a low density that if you dropped it into a bathtub it'd float like a bar of Ivory soap. That's from *Contemporary Astronomy*."

Quite laughed with delight. "Jupiter! Where have you been all my life!"

Jupe drew himself up to his full five feet eight and three-quarters inches and grinned. "Recycling just one run of the Sunday *New York Times* would save 75,000 trees. Zero Population Growth Reporter."

"Good one!" said Quite.

Silas Ek frowned and looked at his watch. "Sorry to interrupt, but I've got an appointment. Quite, would you and Hack show the guys Club Dead? I'll be right back." He turned to the Investigators. "Think about what I said. I'll need your decision before you leave. I hope I can count on you."

Oh, yeah, the virus, Jupe reminded himself as he tried not to stare at beautiful Qute. Ek wanted them to stop their investigation, while the Investigators wanted to continue it. What should they do?

“What’s Club Dead?” Bob asked as Qute and Hack led them into the Oracle warehouse.

Hack laughed and said mysteriously. “You’ll see. But don’t worry...you’ll like it.”

While he kept his eye on Qute, Pete was also fascinated by big Hack. “Do you work out every day?” he asked the teen heartthrob.

“Yup. Pecs, lats, quads,” Hack explained. “I’ve got a routine, you know? How about yourself?”

While Hack and Pete talked muscles, the group wound through dark wood-paneled halls lined with closed office doors. “Man, this place is antique,” Bob said. “Yeah, everything’s so state of the art around here,” Hack said as he opened a door at the end of the corridor, “it’s hard to remember the building’s ancient.”

“Oh, wow!” Pete cried as he followed Hack into a cavernous room. “Is this Club Dead?” Jupe asked in awe. “Yup,” Hack said. “Dead at Oracle means something’s no longer needed. Say a picture or a commercial’s in the can—finished. Some of the ‘dead’ props and stuff can be used later, on other projects. So they’re stored here—Club Dead.”

Club Dead was a two-story-high fantasy land. Just inside the entrance stood a tall chrome robot with crab claws for hands. Beyond were crammed exotic creatures, scenery, and machines. My dad would kill to see this place, thought Pete.

“This room is so much fun we hate to go to work,” said Hack. “Check this.” He flipped a switch.

“Watch the magic screen,” Qute said, pointing up.

To their right a twelve-foot television screen high on the wall turned on with a soft click. The group watched as gigantic dancing bears melted into dancing molecules the size of baseballs. Then the background of futuristic skyscrapers loomed larger and larger until they threatened to topple right out of the screen.

“Computer graphics?” Jupe asked.

Qute nodded. “The best ever. Artists draw outlines of people or things on the computer, and then the computer fills in the outlines and makes them move.”

“I get it,” Bob said. “The computer makes 2-D images into 3-D ones.”

“Yeah,” Hack said. “That’s how a lot of animation’s done now.”

“But not every computer can do it,” Qute added. “We’re talking major number crunching here.”

“Like twelve trillion calculations a second to make a complicated 3-D image move.” Jupe grinned as everyone looked at him, astounded.

“How’d you know that?” Qute was impressed.

“Read it in Time magazine.”

Just then the door opened, and Silas Ek stuck in his bald head. “They’re ready for you on the set,” he told Qute and Hack.

“Thanks,” Qute said. She slipped a hand inside her pocket and pulled out three small plastic models of herself in Cosmic Trek. She gave one to each Investigator. “Here’s some souvenirs. Don’t forget me, okay? Great meeting you!” And she ran out the door. “Later!” Hack dashed after her. As the Investigators watched the twins disappear, Silas Ek muttered to himself, “I can’t believe what I have to waste my time on! Junk food missing from the employee lockers. What next!” He shook his head wearily, then looked at the Investigators. “Do you guys have to get back, or would you like to look around some more?” At Ek’s question, an alarm went off in Pete’s head. “Oh, no!” he groaned. “Kelly!” Pete and Bob checked their watches. “It’s four thirty.” Bob gulped. “We’ve missed the movie,” Pete sighed. “We’re in deep, deep trouble.”

“Perhaps I can help,” Silas Ek said. He reached into his suit coat pocket and handed each of the guys two free movie passes. “I hope Oracle can count on you to keep our secret. Since we’re the ones who stand to lose the most, I think we should be the ones to call the shots, don’t you?”

Ek was being logical again, Jupe thought. The way the security chief presented his argument made sense.

At least their investigation had discovered that Rome had started the virus. Maybe it was time to quit, so Oracle didn’t matter anymore.

“Fine with me,” Pete told Ek, and headed down the corridor. “I’m outta here!”

“Wait for me,” Bob said, running after Pete.

“I guess The Three Investigators are turning the case back to you,” Jupiter said to Ek.

He followed his friends out to the front, where a guard unlocked the steel exit gate.

The guys hopped in Pete's blue Aries and headed toward the junkyard. They were reliving their visit to Oracle as they neared a narrow bridge.

"She's a goddess," Bob breathed.

"Absolutely brilliant," Jupe enthused.

Just then a black pickup appeared on their left, keeping pace.

"Go ahead, guy," Pete muttered to the pickup. "Pass!"

But the pickup stayed with them. Suddenly its right front fender dipped toward the Aries.

"He's trying to push us off the bridge!" Pete cried and swerved.

Jupe stared at the man in the pickup's cab. "Guys! It's Norton Rome!"

Chapter 11

Chase Counter-Chase

THE JOWLY FACE OF NORTON ROME GLARED OUT AT them. He had pudgy cheeks and glittering eyes that narrowed with determination.

“So that’s Norton Rome!” Bob said. “He looks...creepy.”

Just then the black pickup lunged toward Pete’s Aries again. It forced the car closer and closer to the guardrail until at last the car scraped it. Sparks flew. Metal screeched.

“He’s trying to kill us!” Jupe cried, looking down into the deep barranca that was just on the other side of the rail.

Pete gritted his teeth. “Hold on!”

Instantly Bob and Jupe braced themselves against the dashboard. Pete had gotten them out of some tight jams with his creative driving, and they fervently hoped this was going to be another save.

Pete hit the accelerator and wrenched the wheel left. There was a sudden thud that made Jupe’s teeth rattle. The Aries plowed into the pickup’s fender and slid on past it.

“We made it!” Jupe breathed.

They weaved at high speed from one side to the other of the quiet country road, blocking the pickup from pulling up alongside them.

“I thought you souped up this car, Pete,” Bob said. “Can’t you outrun him?”

“I am trying!”

Pete floored the gas pedal. He checked his rear-view mirror. “He’s still with me. He must have jets under his hood!”

Suddenly a bullet whined past Pete’s open window.

“Oh, man!” Bob groaned.

Pete had an idea. Anything to shake this maniac loose. He lifted his foot from the accelerator so that the Aries’ speed would slow. He kept the car steadily on the right side of the road.

“What’re you doing?” Bob cried.

“You’re going to get us killed!” Jupe predicted.

“Stay with me, guys,” Pete said.

“Do we have a choice?” Bob wailed.

Just then the menacing pickup pulled up alongside the Aries. Pete suddenly slammed on the brakes. The pickup, not tumbling to Pete’s scheme, continued at its same speed and hurtled past them.

“Ha!” Pete said. “Gotcha!”

The pickup, now ahead of them, swerved right. Another shot sang past the car as Norton Rome fired back over his shoulder. He was driving with one hand.

“We’re too close!” Bob exclaimed.

“Or not close enough,” Pete said. Grimly he pressed the accelerator again and closed in on the pickup’s tail. Now no matter how much the pickup swerved, Norton Rome couldn’t get an angle to fire on the Aries behind him.

“Way to go!” Jupe said gratefully.

“Don’t get your hopes up!” Pete warned. He was trying to guess what Norton Rome would do next. Suddenly the pickup began pulling away! Pete leaned forward behind the wheel and tensed. “Hang on, guys!” Pete had hardly gotten the words out when the pickup jammed on its brakes, fishtailed, and came to a grinding stop directly across the narrow road.

“He’s blocked us!” Bob cried. A big pistol poked out of the driver’s window, aimed straight at the Aries.

“Duck!” Jupe yelled.

But Pete was already taking evasive action. He hit the accelerator. As bullets peppered the air around them, the Aries sprang forward. Instantly it swerved off the road, to the right, skidded through brush, reentered the road on the other side of the stopped pickup, and raced away. “Whew!” Jupe said, wiping sweat from his face. As they looked back, the guys saw the stocky figure of Norton Rome climb out of the pickup and stare furiously after them. The sudden halt had stalled his pickup. There was no way Rome was going to catch them now.

“Good work!” Bob said.

Pete increased his speed along the country road.

“Now we’ve got to get back to the junkyard. Pronto!”

Bob groaned, thinking what Pete was thinking.

“Oh, no. The girls!”

It was dusk at the junkyard, and there were no signs of Kelly and Elizabeth.

“Man, are we in trouble,” Bob said as he looked around. “They didn’t even leave any notes!”

The guys went into the workshop and Pete called Kelly. "Hello," he began. Instantly he winced and yanked the phone away from his ear. "She hung up on me!" He dialed again.

Jupe watched from his stool. "Will someone please tell me why guys go to so much trouble to stay in trouble?"

Bob leaned over, nose to nose with Jupe, and said slowly as if explaining to a lunatic, "Girls are prettier than guys. They smell better. They have nice skin. They have strange opinions. We like girls, and so do you. I saw how you looked at Qute den Zom. Another minute and you'd have been drooling!"

Jupe's round face turned bright red. "I do not drool!" But Bob was right—Jupe really liked Qute. Her beautiful face flashed before his eyes, and he thought of the tiny model of her in his pocket. Fat chance he'd forget her!

Bob laughed, and Pete made shushing sounds with his hand. "Kelly! We're sorry. I'm sorry. We got tied up with Hack den Zorn. I can't tell you where we met him, but...no, really, I can't—" He winced again, dialed again, and got out only "Hello." He listened for quite a while, then silently hung up.

"What gives?" Bob wanted to know.

"She's really mad," Pete said. He slumped into a chair. "She wants to know what lie I'm going to tell her next. No way she believes we met Hack den Zorn. She's going to a girlfriend's for a slumber party, and I'm supposed to bug off."

Bob took a deep breath. "My turn." He dialed Elizabeth's number. "Hi, Elizabeth. This is Bob." And now Bob listened. At last he quietly hung up. He slumped in a chair next to Pete. "She's going to the same slumber party Kelly is. Her last words were, and I quote, 'Drop dead!'"

"Great," Jupiter said brightly. "We should work on the case tonight anyway."

"Lay off, Jupe," Pete said. "We told Mr. Ek we'd drop the investigation."

Jupe crossed his arms. "That was before Norton Rome tried to kill us. That changed the ball game. It's not like we can go up to him and say"—Jupe's voice changed into a sniveling whine—"Please, please, don't hurt us, Mr. Rome. We're being good little boys and staying out of your blackmail!"

Pete and Bob laughed.

“There’s also the sicko in the green jacket and white high-tops,” Jupe reminded them. “Maybe he’s the one who set off the rocket today. Those two guys seem determined to make cream cheese out of us.”

“He’s right, Pete,” said Bob.

Pete nodded. “I’d like to take Norton Rome’s temperature with my fist!”

“First we’ve got to find him.” Jupe said. “Or Greenjacket, and before they find us. Looks to me like they’re working together.”

“I’m with the program,” Bob said, and stood up. “But as long as we’re staying in tonight, I’ll make the changes in my Civil War paper. It’s in my car. I’ll be right back.”

Jupe opened a jar of peanut butter and Pete rummaged through the refrigerator.

“Nada,” Pete said. “The fridge is bare. We’re going to have to order in pizza.”

“Fine,” Jupe said, and licked peanut butter from his finger. “But eat it outside, okay? Watching you guys scarf down a pizza might make me kill!”

“Hey, no prob,” Pete said. “What kind do you want?”

“Anchovy, pepperoni, and onion,” Jupe said promptly, then caught himself. “What am I saying? Now hear this: No pizza for Jupiter!”

Pete shrugged and grabbed the phone book.

“Speaking of pizza,” Jupe said as he dug in for more peanut butter. “Did you hear Ek talking about some missing junk food?”

“Yeah, so what?”

“Hey, guys!” Bob exclaimed as he burst into the workshop. “You’re not going to believe this, but guess who’s staked out the junkyard again?”

“Greenjacket?” Jupe said, jumping up.

“The same!” Bob confirmed.

Pete growled, “Let me at ‘im!”

While Jupe trotted over to the office and killed the junkyard lights, Pete and Bob ran to the back of the yard. As soon as Jupe joined them, they lifted a couple of loose boards and slipped out into the shadowy night.

As they circled around toward the front, Bob whispered, “He’s across the street, hiding behind Aunt Mathilda’s hibiscus bush. You can see his white high-tops underneath.”

“Got it,” Pete said.

Pete directed Bob to the right and Jupe to the left. He’d

take the middle. “Let’s get the creep!”

Chapter 12

Virus Busters!

PETE SQUATTED NEXT TO THE JUNKYARD FENCE, studying the hibiscus bush across the street. At last he saw a small movement, then the outline of a man, and finally the faint flash of Greenjacket's white high-tops as he shifted weight. Beyond the lurking man stood Jupe's house.

Pete glanced right as Jupe and Bob darted past Bob's parked VW and out across the darkest part of the street. They slid into the cover of a couple of bushes. Pete gave Jupe a minute to circle around. Now Jupe and Bob were flanking Greenjacket on his side of the street. Whichever way the guy ran, the Investigators had him!

Like a finely tuned machine, Pete sprang up and barreled across the street directly toward the guy. Instantly Bob and Jupe closed in on him too.

Greenjacket quickly took in the situation and tore off at an angle between Pete and Jupiter. Smoothly Pete turned to intercept him.

With lightning power, Pete shot a mae-keage front snap kick at Greenjacket's head. Now was the time for all his karate lessons to pay off.

But Greenjacket moved surprisingly fast himself. And he knew karate too! He ducked and spun into a yoko-geri side kick aimed directly at Pete's chest. Pete blocked with a downward X block and started to deliver a shuto-uchi sword-hand strike to the guy's neck.

Greenjacket leaped nimbly backward. "I've got a gun!" he threatened. "Stay away!"

Pete peered through the gloom trying to spot the weapon.

"Where's Norton Rome?" Greenjacket demanded.

Bob, closing in from the other side, couldn't believe his ears. "Come again?"

"Tell me where Nort is," the guy insisted, "or I'll shoot!"

Pete saw that the guy's left hand was empty, and his right hand was shoved in his jacket pocket. But the pocket bulge wasn't the right size or shape for a gun. All the guy had in

there was his fist!

“With what?” Pete snapped. “Your finger? Get him, guys!”

The Investigators lunged and took the guy down. But he didn’t resist. Slowly they untangled and stood up.

“Okay, mister, get up,” Bob said. “But no more tricks.”

Pete crouched down. “The turkey’s out cold!”

Worried, the other two Investigators leaned over the downed man.

Pete pressed an ear to his chest. “Heartbeat’s normal. Let’s get him inside where there’s some light.”

They carted Greenjacket through the junkyard to Jupe’s workshop.

“I think we blew it,” Jupe said as they stretched the guy out on the couch. “If he doesn’t know where Rome is, he’s probably not working with him.”

“Yeah, I thought about that too,” Bob said. “But why does he think we know?”

Just then the man groaned. He had a wide, freckled face. His eyes fluttered open. They were as black as his hair. “You haven’t found Nort either?” he said, disappointed.

“Now wait a sec, dude,” Pete said. “Forget the innocent act! You’re the guy that tried to waste Jupe with a microwave cart.”

“In Nort’s apartment?” The man sat up and felt his head. “But—I had to...Is he Jupe?” He pointed at Jupiter, and when Pete nodded he continued. “I figured he’d come into the kitchen to find me, so I had to scare him off.”

“Who tried to pulverize us with the spaceship?” Jupe shot back at the stranger. “You were the only person at Oracle who had it in for us!”

“In the first place,” Greenjacket said, “I’ve got no beef with you. All I wanted was for you to lead me to Nort. I’ve been hunting for him all over. And as for who zapped you at Oracle...that might’ve been Nort. I spotted Nort in the crowd today. I was following him when you started chasing me, Jupe. You made me lose him!”

“I did?” Jupiter said. “Norton Rome was there?”

“Don’t know what he thought he was doing,” the guy went on. “But there are so many employees at Oracle that he probably figured he could dodge Ek if he kept his eyes open.”

Jupe pulled on his lower lip, a sure sign that he was thinking hard. “Maybe we should trade information,” he

said at last, and stuck out his hand. He introduced all of them. “You obviously know Rome, but what were you doing at Oracle?”

The guy shook hands with each Investigator. “My name’s Branson Barr, and I’m a programmer at Oracle, same as Nort. In fact, I used to be Nort’s friend, until he went off the deep end. This all started because he and I made up a computer game to play on our breaks. We called it Mock War.”

“You mean, battles with aliens or something?” Pete said.

“No, Mock War’s a series of battles between opposing armies of computer programs,” Branson explained.

“Were the programs viruses?” Jupe asked.

Branson shook his dark head. “Like viruses. Our Mock War programs were designed to kill only each other, usually by devouring the other guy’s instructions. You won if you had the most programs at the end. But Mock War wasn’t dangerous because when we finished playing, we’d erase the killer programs from our computers’ memories.”

“How could Mock War lead to blackmail?” Bob wanted to know.

“It’s because Nort’s a greedy son of a gun,” Branson said angrily. He stood up, stretched, and stalked around the workshop. “He used to ask me how come a smart guy like him wasn’t rich? He said working a job was too slow, a sucker’s game. Then one night while we were playing Mock War, he got the idea of using a virus to put the bite on Oracle.”

“Blackmail!” Pete said.

“Exactly.” Branson sat down on the couch again. “Nort’s wild, unpredictable. So I figured he was kidding. Brother, was I wrong! I found that out Saturday when Ek called me. He was frantic. Oracle’s system was infected, and they’d got a blackmail message from Nort. When I tried to untangle the virus, I discovered it was a lot more complex than anyone realized. I knew we’d lose everything unless we got the antidote.”

“So you went looking for Rome,” Jupe said.

“And I still haven’t tracked him down,” he said. “Time’s running out. Ek’s supposed to get a phone call tomorrow night before midnight to tell him where to deliver the five million dollars!”

“Which means we’ve got only one day to find him!” Bob said.

Branson Barr nodded. "Now, what about you? Have you seen Nort?"

"Rome almost rubbed us out a couple of hours ago," Pete said, and described the pickup's attack.

"That is one scary guy," Bob said.

Branson slammed a fist into the palm of his hand. "I wish I could get my hands on him! He's wrecking everything just to make himself rich!"

Jupiter stood and paced around the shack, pulling on his lower lip again.

"What gives, Jupe?" Bob prompted.

"Oracle's the key," Jupiter said at last. "Rome must've spotted me there. Maybe he thought I'd seen him, too, and that I'd tell Ek. That means Rome could've been the one who destroyed the spaceship. When that didn't wipe us out, he came after us in his pickup."

"Sounds right to me," Bob said.

"Anyway, Oracle's our only lead," Jupe went on. "If Rome was there today, maybe he'll show up tomorrow." He crossed the room and came back to stand in front of the little group.

"It's time we had a plan," he announced. "Now, listen. This is what we'll do..."

Chapter 13

The Sugar Trap

ON TUESDAY MORNING JUPITER SAT IN HIS ELECtronics workshop and screwed together the heavy plastic cases for two walkie-talkies. He'd just added power boosters to each, kicking them up from two to five watts.

"You sure you know what you're doing, Jupe?" Pete called from the grease pit. He and Bob were painting signs for the Ford delivery van.

"Does an atom have electrons?" Jupe said huffily.

As Pete and Bob chuckled, Branson Barr entered the junkyard carrying a stack of six enormous bakery boxes.

"I got enough for a battalion," Branson said cheerfully. "Doughnuts, sweet rolls, and croissants. The junk-food freaks at Oracle will go crazy." He loaded the boxes into the back of the van.

"Great!" Bob said as he and Pete hefted one of their signs.

"Gangway!" Pete ordered, and they carried the sign to the van and held it up against the van's side.

"Is it straight?" Bob asked.

Jupiter came outside and studied it. On the sign's left, a painted coffee cup and doughnut danced. On the right, pink icing dripped over chocolate-brown words: Snax Galore at Your Door!

Jupe's stomach rumbled as he thought of the bakery goodies. Quickly he peeled a banana to ward off temptation. "Looks straight to me," he said, and bit off a chunk. "Ought to convince everyone we're really a coffee-and-doughnuts truck."

"By the time we finish," Bob promised, "we will be. Let's bolt it on, Pete."

As the guys attached the signs to either side of the delivery van, Jupiter's Uncle Titus staggered up with a big coffee maker. "What a find this was!" he enthused. "Do you know how few coffeepots there are that can operate out of a car's cigarette lighter?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Darn few. That's how many!"

"Thanks, Uncle Titus." Jupiter set the coffeepot in the

van next to the bottled water, coffee, powdered cream, and sugar packets.

But Uncle Titus was already gone. He'd spotted a customer entering the junkyard with a large cracked vase. The guys heard him exclaim, "What a treasure! Is it for sale?"

Shaking their heads over Uncle Titus's idea of a treasure, the guys returned to work checking off supplies.

"That does it," Jupe announced. "We're ready for the stakeout." He eyed Pete and Bob. "Last chance for you to call your girlfriends again," he teased.

"No thanks, turkey," Bob said ruefully. "One attack of frostbite per morning is all my doctor will allow!"

"Owww!" Pete yelped, and grabbed his ears in mock pain. "Turn the freezer to dee-frost!"

"Come on, you loonies." Jupiter laughed. "Let's get rolling."

Jupiter and Branson Barr took the van, Jupe driving, while Bob and Pete piled into Pete's car.

"So this is our walkie-talkie?" Branson examined the narrow black box as they drove toward the industrial area of Rocky Beach. Pete and Bob had its mate.

"Yep. I pumped up the power in both of them. We can talk to Bob and Pete even if they're twenty miles away. That is, if the conditions are right—clear atmosphere and nothing to interfere with line-of-sight transmission."

"Good thing there aren't any mountains in Rocky Beach."

"And it's a clear day," Jupe added. "Now, if we can just spot Rome..."

At Oracle, Jupe parked the delivery van at an angle near the steel gates. Everyone entering or leaving would see it—and Jupe and Branson could count on a good look at them. Since it appeared that Norton Rome had gone in and out of Oracle the day before, the Investigators and Branson Barr were gambling he would do the same today. They planned to stay the entire day if necessary.

Pete and Bob sailed past in Pete's baby-blue Aries. As they'd agreed earlier, Pete doubled back and parked behind the eucalyptus trees across the street. From there he and Bob could watch everything that happened at the delivery van and give chase when—and if—Norton Rome appeared.

Almost as soon as Jupiter parked, the first car pulled in next to the van. Branson plugged in the coffeepot, and Jupe quickly opened up the back to display the doughnuts and

other treats.

“Snax Galore,” read a man in a denim jacket and jeans as he hopped out of his car. He looked in the back of the van and whistled. “My kind of food!” He bought two chocolate-filled croissants.

The customers formed a steady line after that. Jupiter served them, and Branson worked inside where his coworkers couldn’t see him.

“Maybe we should go into business!” Branson said during one of the infrequent lulls.

Jupe nodded, but he was thinking about how long it had been since he’d tasted chocolate. Not to mention real sugar. Or even a muffin. His stomach rumbled, and he reached for his jar of peanut butter. But somehow his hand made a detour...to the chocolate-dipped doughnuts!

“Jupiter!” Branson whispered. “Ek just arrived in his Subaru.”

Jupe snapped his hand back and peered around the van’s door. He caught a glimpse of Ek’s bald head, severe face, and spectacles, then ducked back out of sight.

“Don’t worry,” Branson whispered to Jupiter. He’d ducked down in the front seat. “Ek’s not like the rest of us—doesn’t touch sugar!”

Jupe almost said, “I don’t either!” but then he remembered how close he’d just come...He stared at the goodies still filling three quarters of the boxes, and suddenly he realized he was a dope. After all the calories in peanut butter, one little doughnut wasn’t going to hurt. Again he reached for the chocolate-dipped one.

“Jupiter!” Branson called. “We’ve got more customers.”

Throwing caution to the wind, Jupe grabbed the doughnut and took a huge, satisfying bite. It was just as good as he’d imagined!

The day passed busily. But by five o’clock the boxes were nearly empty, and there was still no sign of Norton Rome or his black pickup.

The mass exodus of Oracle employees began.

“Check every car!” Jupiter said. “Maybe he’s driving something different.” He jumped out of the back of the van to get a better look at all the cars as they left.

“I don’t see how we could’ve missed him,” Branson said worriedly. They studied car after endless car.

Across the street Jupe spotted Pete’s and Bob’s faces among the thick eucalyptus leaves. They looked as

discouraged as Jupiter felt. It had been a long, long day.

Just then tires suddenly screeched in the street. A silver Subaru shifted gears and came roaring back to the van's tail.

"It's Ek!" Jupiter said, scrambling to get back into the van. "He saw me!"

Branson Barr ducked down in the front seat again. Jupe was just hopping into the back when his Garfield T-shirt was yanked abruptly backward.

"You punk!" Silas Ek said angrily. "We had a deal! Now you're going to have to come with me!"

Chapter 14

Cross Talk

“NORTON ROME TRIED TO WIPE US OUT YESTERday, Mr. Ek,” Jupiter responded angrily. “We have to catch him before he tries again.”

“He what?” Shocked, Silas Ek let go of Jupe.

Jupe told the Oracle security chief how Rome had tried to kill them with his pickup. “Now we’ve got to find Rome,” he finished. “And maybe that will help you.”

Ek stubbornly shook his bald head. “No deal. Okay, I understand you’ve got personal reasons to track him down, but I can’t jeopardize Oracle by helping you...or letting you help us.” He gestured at the delivery van and his voice rose in fury. “It’s good cover. But you’re loitering, and next time I’ll have you arrested! Now pack up and get out!”

The bald security chief waited impatiently with arms crossed as Jupe closed up the van, climbed into the driver’s seat, and took off for the junkyard. As they passed the eucalyptus grove, Pete pulled out behind them and joined the retreat.

“Brother!” Branson said as he sat up in the passenger seat. “I was hoping we could stick around until at least eight o’clock. By then everybody’s gone. Nort and I were the only ones who ever stuck around till midnight.”

Jupe lifted his chin with determination. “We’re going to get Rome yet!”

“Just think, we started out feeling sorry for Rome,” Bob said. “Now it looks like he’s going to bag a cool five mil!”

The sun had set, the stars were out, and Bob, Pete, and Branson Barr had just polished off a giant pizza while Jupe had emptied his peanut butter jar and demolished three bananas. Now Bob, Jupe, and Branson were sitting around the grease pit watching Pete clean up the delivery van. The four were discussing the case.

“Not to mention getting away with blackmail,” Branson added.

“And attempted murder,” grumbled Pete. “Don’t forget he tried to run us off the road. He should be shot for what

he did to my paint job alone.” Pete removed the last bolt from the second Snax Galore sign. “Where is that sleazeball?”

“What are we going to do?” Bob asked Jupe. “Come on, man, you’re the brains. I mean, we can’t just roll over and play dead.”

“We’ve got to do something!” Pete leaped high and executed a powerful tobi-geri kick from the top of his jump.

Suddenly cheers and applause sounded across the dark junkyard.

“Go, Pete, go!” sang Kelly, shaking imaginary pom-poms as she ran into the pool of light around the grease pit.

“You are a lucky man, Bob Andrews. We are going to forgive you,” Elizabeth said as she sailed straight to Bob and smiled sweetly at him.

Bob stood up and grinned down at her. “Does this mean we have a date?”

“Well, yes,” she said. “If you’re not too busy.”

“I’m not, I’m not!”

Kelly had slipped her arm around Pete’s. She gave it a little squeeze. “You must come see Cosmic Trek tonight, Pete. We can’t spend our whole vacation fighting!”

Pete was about to point out that she was doing the fighting, but he thought better of it. “Let’s go!”

“We’ll go too, Bob,” Elizabeth said, and headed toward the junkyard entrance. “Okay?”

“You bet!” Bob started to follow her.

“Just a sec,” Jupe interrupted. “If you dudes want to catch Norton Rome, tonight’s our last chance!”

Pete groaned, and Bob reluctantly turned to look at Jupiter.

“Last chance how?” Kelly asked suspiciously.

“Haven’t you finished with that Rome man yet?” Elizabeth demanded.

“We found out Rome’s behind the virus that trashed our disks,” Jupiter explained. “He’s done some other rotten stuff, but we can’t tell you what until we catch him.”

“Yeah, sure,” Kelly said.

Jupiter shrugged. One of the problems with most girls, he decided, was that they thought dates were more important than catching criminals. Now, Quite den Zom, he was sure, wouldn’t think that way at all. “What do you mean ‘tonight’s our last chance?’” Pete said.

“You got another good plan, Jupe?” asked Bob. “I mean,

our plan today to stake out”—he couldn’t say Oracle’s name in front of the girls—“the company was a total waste!”

“What company?” Elizabeth said. “Pete, what’s going on?” demanded Kelly. Jupe ignored the girls. “We know Rome’s going to be doing one thing tonight for sure. He’s going to be collecting his money!”

Branson Barr snapped his fingers. “I get it! All we have to do is find out where Ek’s taking the money and wait for Rome to pick it up!”

“Who is this Ek person?” Kelly asked Pete. But Pete was watching Jupiter. “How do we find that out, Jupe?”

“Another stakeout.”

Branson nodded. “Ek’s supposed to get the call between ten forty-five and eleven forty-five tonight at his house, telling him where to take the money. We’ll follow him to the drop and trap Nort.”

Kelly’s green eyes narrowed. “You don’t all have to do whatever it is you have to do. Jupe, why don’t you and your friend go do it. That way Pete and Bob can come to the movies with us.”

“Good idea, Kelly!” said Elizabeth.

Jupe shook his head. “Someone should also stake out the, er, company again. We still don’t know what Rome was doing there yesterday. And it makes sense to cover all bases because we won’t get another chance.”

“Yeah, this is it,” Branson assured the little group. “After tonight you can count on Nort taking his dough and going where no one’ll ever find him again!”

“Okay,” Pete said. “I want to follow Ek to the stake-out so I can meet Rome up close and personal!”

“Pete!” Kelly wailed. “You’re doing it again!”

“Fine with me, Pete.” Jupiter checked his watch and stood up. “We’d better get a move on. It’s almost ten o’clock.”

Elizabeth flashed a smile at Bob. “I guess we’ll have to go to the movie alone, Bob.”

Bob looked uneasily at Elizabeth.

“Come on, Bob,” Pete said. “You can go with me. We’ll let Jupe and Branson stake out the company, and we’ll grab Rome ourselves!”

“Right!” Bob said enthusiastically.

The girls exchanged looks of disgust.

“We’re through, Pete Crenshaw!” Kelly said, and she stalked away.

“You’re history, Bob Andrews,” Elizabeth announced haughtily, and she followed Kelly out of the junkyard.

Jupiter laughed. “They’ll get over it,” he said. “Come on, let’s go close this case!”

Chapter 15

Live Action

PETE AND BOB SAT IN PETE'S CAR IN FRONT OF THE address Branson Barr had given them. They glanced up and down the moonlit residential street.

"We're here!" Bob announced into the walkie-talkie.

"Roger," came Branson's voice.

"Let's go," Pete commanded.

Pete and Bob slipped out of the Aries, crept up the lawn to the lighted front window of the ranch-style house, and squatted behind bushes there.

"I hear voices," Bob whispered.

Slowly the two inched up until they could just see in the window.

"It's Ek all right," Pete breathed.

With Ek was a blond woman in a black leather pantsuit.

"And Phyllis Hyem," Bob said.

Pete nodded. "We saw her painting at Oracle."

The famous founder of Oracle Light & Magic sat on a sofa and nervously smoked a long brown cigarette. Ek paced around the telephone. He wore a business suit and carried a smallish package wrapped in black plastic. Their voices were a low drone. The guys could hear the sound but couldn't make out the words. "He's waiting for the call from Rome," Bob deduced.

Pete nodded. "Let's get back to the car and tell Jupe and Branson what's going on."

As Branson took Bob's latest report over the walkie-talkie, Jupiter rolled down the van window and slipped Branson's employee I.D. card into the sentry box slot. Silently the great steel gate to Oracle Light & Magic swung open.

"Home, sweet home," Branson said as Jupe drove the delivery van slowly onto the eerie grounds.

Moonlight filtered through tall eucalyptus trees. The trees cast long inky shadows across the big complex. Pools of yellow light spilled from outdoor lamps attached to posts and the sides of buildings.

Suddenly a man appeared out of nowhere in front of them. Jupe hit the brakes just as a flashlight beam blinded him.

“Where d’you think you’re goin’?” the man shouted in a nasal voice. With the flashlight still on Jupe, he trotted around to the driver’s side.

“Who wants to know?” Jupe demanded in return.

Branson leaned across Jupe. “Hey, Duane!”

“You again, Branson?” the nasal voice said, and the light beamed onto Branson Barr. “Where’s your pal Nort? I’m supposed to report to Mr. Ek if I spot Nort.” Jupe’s eyes adjusted. He saw that the tall, angular man wore a security guard’s uniform.

“Haven’t seen Nort in a while,” Branson told the guard. “This is a friend of mine. Anybody around tonight?”

“Quiet as a monk’s cell. Everyone’s long gone.”

“As usual,” Branson said. “We’ll be working late. See you when we leave.”

The guard nodded and waved them on. Jupiter drove into the deserted parking lot.

“That guy likes to scare people,” Jupe said.

“Yeah. It’s his hobby. He’s got nothing better to do.” They got out of the van and walked across the grounds. “Nort and I were the only ones who ever worked past nine o’clock. When we’d finally quit, it’d be so quiet we’d have to wake up Duane to tell him we were going home.”

“Wonder why Rome was here yesterday?” Jupe said.

“Maybe to pick something up. I don’t know. But it must’ve been real important to risk Ek’s spotting him.”

“Did you check out Rome’s desk?”

“And his locker,” Branson said as they walked through the grounds. “I’ll show them to you. They were a mess, but there was nothing suspicious in his stuff. But I figure Ek had already been through Nort’s things by then. If there was anything to find, he sure would’ve found it.”

They passed low prefab buildings, a welding shed, high mounds of lumber and props stored beneath tarps, and the new frame of the replacement spaceship.

“I’ll bet Ek trashed Rome’s desk and locker, just like he did Rome’s apartment,” Jupe said.

“He’s got all the delicacy of a sledge hammer. But how do you know Ek wrecked the apartment?” Branson said as they went inside the big warehouse.

“Because the first thing you’d do if you were searching

Rome's apartment would be to check out his computer," Jupe explained. "But the computer was cold when I tried it. You never had time to turn it on, which means you didn't have time to trash the place either. I figure you must've talked to the manager, gone home and thought about it, then decided to search the apartment. You probably got there five minutes before I did."

"Exactly." Shaking his head with amazement at Jupe's deduction, Branson led the way through the wood-paneled office corridor. The place was eerily quiet. As they walked Jupe smelled the faint odor of pizza. It made his stomach rumble, but he sternly reminded himself that he had delicious peanut butter and bananas waiting for him at home.

As Branson opened the storage room door Jupe said, "Hey, Club Dead!" It made him think of beautiful Qute. He patted the jeans pocket where he carried the little replica she'd given him.

They stepped inside the gigantic room and paused next to the menacing chrome robot.

"This is my favorite place," Branson told Jupe. "Sometimes when Nort and I worked late, we'd try out the costumes, watch the videos, and turn on the toys."

He flipped a switch. Yellow, pink, and blue strobe lights streaked and swirled around the vast room. He flipped another switch, and lively calliope music danced in the air.

"It's like a carnival," Jupe said.

Just then there was a horrendous roar. Jupe spun on his heel, and a huge metal face shooting red sparks from its fiery eyes blasted straight at him. He dodged.

Branson Barr laughed.

Jupe looked up.

Laughing still, Branson touched a switch near a Grim Speaker costume. The metal mask whooshed back up into a black box mounted above Jupe's head.

"You guys save weird stuff!" Jupe said grumpily, and straightened his Friends of the Earth T-shirt.

"Weird's what made us popular."

The two searched through Club Dead, but found nothing that indicated Norton Rome had been there recently. Branson turned off the lights and sound. Next he led Jupe to the glass-enclosed computer center where he and Rome worked. They went through Rome's chaotic drawers and the papers on his desk.

“Same old junk,” Branson decided.

Jupiter nodded. “Where’s the locker?”

Branson showed Jupe the locker room next door. He opened one in the middle. “This is Nort’s.”

Frayed sneakers, candy wrappers, a broken Thermos, and science fiction paperbacks littered the tall, narrow locker.

“Nothing here either,” Jupe decided. “Wonder what he was doing today?”

Branson shrugged. “Let’s go. I’ve got a place we can watch from.”

Outdoors the cool night wind carried the pungent fragrance of the swaying eucalyptus trees. Branson led Jupe up a wooden staircase attached to a potting shed. At the top was a narrow deck.

“This is great.” Jupe leaned out over the railing. If Norton Rome appeared, they should spot him easily.

From here they could see the warehouse, the front gates, many of the buildings, and the back fence. Unlike the concrete block wall in front and along the sides, the back fence was thick redwood planks, also topped with barbed wire. Beyond the fence was an empty field.

“A bunch of us eat lunch up here sometimes.” Branson opened two lawn chairs, and they sat down. “I’ve got a feeling this is going to be a long, dull night.”

“Yeah,” Jupe agreed ruefully. “When Pete and Bob corner Rome, they’ll go in for the capture!” This was a mistake, he decided. They should’ve gone where the action was—with the other guys.

As Pete and Bob sat in the car waiting, Ek’s front door suddenly burst open. The security chief ran out. He tossed the package wrapped in black plastic onto the front seat of his silver Subaru and jumped behind the wheel.

Pete started his car.

“That package has got to have the five mil in it,” Bob said.

Pete nodded. As Bob radioed in to Jupe and Branson, the Subaru zoomed out of the driveway. Pete waited until the car was half a block ahead before following it. The Subaru headed downtown. Pete let other cars feed in between so that Ek wouldn’t spot the tail.

Suddenly the Subaru whipped into the nearly full parking lot of Rocky Beach High School. Ek jumped out of the car and hurried toward the auditorium.

Pete zipped into a parking slot between an RV and a long

Cadillac. The guys hit the pavement running. But just as they neared the auditorium, the double doors opened wide and people swarmed out.

“The spring play!” Bob remembered as the throng milled around them, laughing, talking, and blocking their view of Silas Ek.

“Hey, there’s Bob,” shouted a little redhead.

“Hi, Jennifer,” Bob called, then he turned anxiously to Pete. “Do you see Ek? Where’d he go?”

“I’ve lost him!” Pete said, craning to look over all the heads. “We’d better split up.”

Pete moved off among the crowd. Bob worked his way around the edges. Where had Ek disappeared?

Pete hopped up on one of the school bike racks. Balancing precariously, he spotted Ek. The security chief was reaching up beneath a big U.S. mailbox. He pulled out an envelope, ripped it open, and quickly read the paper inside.

Pete jumped down. Time to get back to the car pronto. But where was Bob? Just then he saw his pal backing away while a foxy blonde followed him, talking. To the rescue, he told himself, and jogged to Bob’s side.

“Hi, Alicia,” Pete told the blonde while he grabbed Bob’s arm. “Bob’ll call you in a few days. Sorry, we’ve gotta go.”

“But...but...” she said, her lavender eyes wide with disappointment.

The Investigators piled into the Aries and shot over to where they could see Ek’s car. As Ek backed out, Pete told Bob about the envelope taped to the bottom of the mailbox. Bob turned on the walkie-talkie to report to Jupiter and Branson.

“Silas should drop the money someplace now for Nort to pick up,” Branson told Bob and Pete.

“Ten-four,” Bob said as they joined the stream of cars exiting the parking lot!

“Man, the traffic’s too heavy,” Pete worried.

There were four cars between the Aries and Ek’s Subaru. When the Subaru reached the head of the line, it darted out into the street’s traffic.

“Move it, Pete!” Bob said.

But the Aries was wedged among the crawling cars. Pete shook his head. “We’re stuck!”

“Never.” Bob jumped out of the car. He raced to the street, and with waving arms directed the cars. The traffic

was so thick that the drivers appreciated his help. He was able to move Pete's line quickly into the street.

For a minute Pete thought they'd lost Ek. Then far ahead he spotted a pair of red taillights disappearing around a corner in a flash of silver. "It's the Subaru," he crowed. "We've got him!"

Elated, Pete and Bob followed Ek's car at a distance as it wound among the Rocky Beach streets.

"He's trying to make sure he isn't followed," Bob decided.

Pete kept the Aries back, allowing other cars to come and go between. At last the silver Subaru turned down a broad avenue rimmed with olive trees on the left side and a high hedge on the right. Theirs were the only two cars on the avenue, so Pete killed his headlights.

"On the other side of that is the Mount Loretta School," Bob said, indicating the hedge. "For Young Ladies."

"Only you would know that!"

As the Subaru approached the middle of the block, it slowed. Ek's arm appeared out his window, and with a powerful hook shot he flung something up over the hedge.

"It's the package!" Bob said. "The plastic reflected the streetlight!"

Pete hit the brakes and raced backward to the beginning of the hedge. As the Subaru squealed away into the night, Pete turned the Aries and zoomed beneath a stone archway onto the grounds of the girls' school. Maybe now they'd find Norton Rome!

Chapter 16

Pickup Tricks

STILL WITHOUT LIGHTS, THE ARIES SPED ALONG A dark, cobbled drive. The two Investigators scanned the moonlit night.

“Rome’s got to be waiting here somewhere!” Bob said as he studied the shadows.

To the right stood a large Mediterranean-style mansion with dark windows. Part of the drive circled in front of it and back out onto the street. But they followed a straight stretch that ran far ahead. On their left was the long, tall hedge over which Ek had thrown his parcel.

Suddenly the sound of a big, powerful engine shattered the silence.

“Look,” Pete said. “Maybe it’s Rome’s wheels!”

A large black mass wavered under dark, overhanging trees on the driveway ahead. Red taillights and the cones of white headlights flashed on.

“It is his pickup!” said Bob, recognizing the truck as it sped off with dazzling speed.

The Aries burned rubber after the pickup. “He must’ve grabbed the dough before we got here,” Pete said grimly as the pickup vanished at the end of the lane.

“Where’d he go?” Bob peered ahead into the night.

Pete screeched the Aries through an exit and into the center of a deserted five-street intersection. The guys studied each street. Rome’s speedy black pickup was nowhere to be seen.

“He’s disappeared!” Pete griped. “That guy’s got to have twelve cylinders under his hood. At least!”

“Major bummer.” Bob pressed a button on the walkie-talkie and reported the bad news to Jupe and Branson.

“You’ve lost Rome?” Jupe repeated, horrified. “How could you lose him?” He had visions of Norton Rome’s next stop being some tropical island where the creep would live in luxury forever.

Bob’s voice crackled over the distance. “The dude knew what he was doing. He set it up so he had exits on both

ends of the drop, and one of them was perfect—five streets to get lost on.”

“Those turbocharged wheels could’ve outrun us anyway,” Pete’s voice added.

“You better believe it,” Bob agreed over the walkie-talkie. “We were lucky Pete outsmarted him yesterday. We never could’ve outrun him.”

“But we can’t let him get away with this,” Branson insisted.

“Hey, it’s not like we have a choice,” Bob said from the other end. “He’s gone!”

“You shouldn’t have lost him in the first place,” Jupe snapped. “Go find him!”

“Are you kidding?” Pete said. But he pressed the accelerator, and the Aries roared off down one of the streets.

“We don’t have a crystal ball!” Bob grumbled into the walkie-talkie as he and Pete scanned the side streets.

“One thing for sure—if you don’t look you won’t find him!” Jupe signed off.

Branson stood up on the roof deck at Oracle. “Maybe we should drive around too,” he said restlessly. “Check out Rome’s apartment or something.”

“He’d be crazy to go back there,” Jupe said.

“Yeah. I guess you’re right.” Slowly Branson sat down again.

“How’s Oracle supposed to get the antidote? Maybe that’ll give us a clue about where he’s headed,” Jupe reasoned.

“Nort’s got to phone Silas with it at exactly fifteen minutes after midnight,” Branson recalled. “Silas insisted he get the antidote pronto. See, if Nort doesn’t come through, all bets are off. Silas will call the cops, cover the airports, and go after Nort with everything he’s got.”

Jupe checked his watch. “It’s eleven thirty. Forty-five minutes before Rome delivers. But what’s to stop Ek from going after Rome then?”

Branson grinned. “Nothing. And knowing Silas, he probably will. But my guess is Nort has some sure-fire scheme to slip past Silas as soon as he gives up the antidote.”

“One more reason to find Rome ASAP!”

Branson nodded. “You know, now that I think about it... Nort’s been getting weirder and weirder. His brain seems

sharp as ever, but his personality's got out of whack somehow.”

“When he came after us on the bridge with his pickup,” Jupe remembered, “he had a strange look. Really intense and staring, but somehow not all there.”

“Know what you mean. I noticed that, too, the last week or so. And he was really keyed up. All the time.”

Just then the growl of an engine sounded in the distance. At first Jupe paid no attention to it. Then he spotted car lights bouncing across the plowed field on the other side of Oracle’s back fence.

“What do you suppose that is?” Jupe stood up and stared.

“Whatever it is, it’s coming toward Oracle.”

“You have a back gate?”

“No.”

Jupe and Branson ran down the stairs. As the two guys raced toward the back fence, the engine grew louder.

“That’s some heavy-duty motor!” Jupe said, remembering the engines he’d heard in Pete’s grease pit.

“It couldn’t be Nort’s pickup,” Branson said in a disbelieving voice. “Could it? I remember Nort had some kind of superpowerful engine installed in his pickup. But still...”

“What’s he doing at Oracle?” Jupe wondered.

“Delivering the antidote? No. He’s supposed to phone Silas with that.”

The pair stopped at the back fence. “Does anyone ever come back here?” Jupe wondered. Lumber, old cars, building blocks, and large assorted junk formed a dark, hilly landscape.

“Not very often. It’s long-term storage.”

The engine grew louder and the headlights fixed on the back fence.

“It’s headed straight at us,” Branson said. “But how’s it going to get inside?”

“We’d better get out of the way in case he comes through the fence!”

Jupe and Branson raced back behind a tarpaulin-covered mound of what looked like fake marble slabs. Just then the vehicle stopped, its motor still running. Slowly a section of the fence swung open, the barbed wire with it. Jupe caught a glimpse of the driver as he was climbing back into his pickup.

“Amazing,” Jupe whispered. “It is Rome!”

“Looks like Nort’s built himself a secret gate! You can’t see this area from the front of the complex where most of us work. Just goes to show how smart he is!”

“That gate’s got to be how Rome came and went yesterday without being spotted,” Jupe reported to Pete and Bob on the walkie-talkie.

“Way to go!” Bob exclaimed. “You found him!”

“I can’t wait to nail the creep!” Pete said.

“Hey, don’t start anything until we get there.”

“And don’t forget, the guy’s got a gun!” Pete added.

As Jupe signed off, Rome’s pickup rolled through the gate and parked behind a long storage shed. Rome got out and closed the gate. It clicked into place so perfectly that you couldn’t tell it was there in the fence. Rome took a small black parcel from the front seat and stuffed it in his jacket.

“There’s the money!” Jupe said in a husky whisper.

Now Rome tossed a tarp over the pickup. Rome was about five foot nine and weighed a good two hundred pounds. His soft, pudgy face and overbright eyes glistened in the moonlight.

“He looks like a crazed Pillsbury Doughboy,” Jupe whispered.

“He’s fat because of all the junk food and the years behind a computer,” Branson whispered back. “I tried to get him to work out with me or go to karate class, but he wouldn’t. He claims to be a lot tougher than he looks.”

“He doesn’t need karate. He’s got a gun. Remember, he shot at us yesterday.”

Rome circled the pickup, carefully tying down the tarp as if he expected to be at Oracle for quite a while. “Wonder why he’s hiding the pickup if he’s planning to skip town,” Jupe went on. “Something really weird’s going on.”

“At least he’s giving Pete and Bob time to get here,” said Branson. “They can help us take him.”

As Rome meticulously worked, Jupe decided that he might as well sit down and take a load off his feet. He saw a granite boulder next to their hiding spot.

Just as Jupe lowered himself, Branson said in an alarmed whisper, “Don’t!”

But Branson was too late. Jupe crashed through the papier-mache rock and landed with a grunt.

Rome lifted his head and stared suspiciously in their direction. He took a step toward them.

While Branson looked frantically around for something to

blame the noise on, Jupiter closed his eyes and transported himself back to his acting days.

“Meow!” he cried, chin raised. “Me—o—ow!”

Rome listened for a moment, but Jupiter’s imitation was so good that the pudgy blackmailer soon grinned and picked up a hefty rock. He heaved it in their direction.

Instantly Jupiter gave an angry yowl, letting the noise trail off as if the cat were running away.

Rome laughed and nodded, satisfied. He went back to tying down the tarp.

Branson stifled a chuckle. “Nice going!”

Jupe smiled modestly. Then he asked Branson, “How could Rome cut a hole in the fence and install that gate without anyone’s noticing? That’s a big project.”

Branson sighed. “In our business, when you’re stumped with a programming or design problem, you wander around, thinking. And nobody bothers you. For instance, the guy who invented the famous Cray supercomputers—Seymour Cray—used to dig a tunnel in his backyard to help him think. So I wasn’t suspicious when Nort was gone more and more each night. But I wish I’d figured out he was up to something...I gave him plenty of time to put together this whole scam.”

Rome finished tying the last knot on the tarp. He stood up and grinned wolfishly. This is a dude convinced he’s a big winner, Jupe decided.

Jupe and Branson melted back among the shadows as Rome walked toward them. He passed quietly by and moved on toward the warehouse. Jupe let out his breath. Rome disappeared inside.

“Where’s he going?” Jupe asked as they ran after. “Back to his desk?”

“Doesn’t make any sense,” Branson agreed. The guys stopped at the door that led into the section of offices. They listened. Silence inside. They opened the door. The lights were spaced far apart on the wood-paneled walls, leaving spooky black pits in between. The guys stepped onto the hardwood floor, and Jupe closed the door, which creaked. It startled them.

“Where would he have gone?” Jupe whispered nervously. Was Rome waiting for them around some blind corner? “Wish I knew!”

They padded down the hall, their steps muffled by their rubber-soled athletic shoes.

“What about Club Dead,” Jupe suggested. “It’d be a great place to hide.”

“Yeah!”

They pressed their ears to the door of Club Dead and listened.

“Zero sound,” Branson whispered.

Jupe turned the knob and pushed open the door a few inches. When nothing happened, he opened it all the way. It creaked. Jupe shook his head in disgust.

In unspoken agreement, they slipped inside and split up. Seeing by the weak light from the open door, they moved off among shadowy mechanical gorillas, suits of armor, a space capsule shell, and a fierce Tyrannosaurus rex. Between the spooky sets and waiting for Rome, Jupe was really jumpy.

Suddenly something whacked his shoulder. Chills shot up his spine.

He whirled. Instantly he bent his knees and raised his hands. He’d get the guy with a judo tai-otoshi body drop!

Branson chuckled quietly next to him. “It’s only a robot.”

Jupe straightened up. Without realizing it, he’d circled back to the door where the great chrome robot stood guard.

“Of course,” Jupe said grumpily. “I knew that.” One of the robot’s heavy arms hung down at its side. “Must’ve gone limp and hit me just as I walked by.”

Suddenly the robot seemed to go haywire. It flung its arm up like a Nazi storm trooper, nearly braining Jupe. Laser beams shot from its eyes. It whirred and clanked and started to clomp forward, shooting out its arm all the while.

Jupe backed away, terrorized.

“Uh—oh,” said Branson. He ducked past the flailing arm and started punching buttons in a panel on the robot’s back. Finally the metal monster slowed down and stopped.

“Needs a repair,” said Branson.

“So do I!” muttered Jupe. “That thing almost gave me a heart attack!”

If Norton Rome was hiding in Club Dead, he had to know he had company now. Warily Jupiter and Branson continued searching.

Something soft brushed Jupe’s head. He nearly jumped out of his skin. He peered up. It was a Grim Speaker costume, attached high to a guy wire. Next to it, a ladder led up to a heavy wire that stretched across the room. Straps from a harness dangled beneath the costume. It looks

like you could do an aerial act with it, Jupe decided. Maybe some other time!

Jupe and Branson headed back to the door. Their nerves were raw, on edge, waiting for Rome to jump out from every shadow.

“Any sign of him?” Jupe mouthed silently over a stack of crates.

Branson shook his head glumly.

“Where to next?” Branson whispered as they walked through the open doorway.

Instead of answering, Jupiter went rigid with fear. And so did Branson. They were staring into the crazed eyes of Norton Rome. He aimed his big Walther 9mm pistol first at one, then the other.

“Brannie!” Rome said in mock friendliness. “I thought you knew—curiosity killed the cat!”

Chapter 17

Psycho

PETE SCREECHED THE ARIES TO A HALT OUTSIDE Oracle.
“Try them again.”

Again Bob pushed the talk button on the walkie-talkie. “Jupe! Branson! Come in. Do you read me?” But silence was Bob’s only answer. “Maybe they’re hurt.” Bob said worried.

“Or maybe Jupe met a chocolate-covered brownie he couldn’t refuse,” Pete tried to kid.

Bob smiled feebly, and Pete’s laugh was only a hollow chuckle. They knew Jupe would answer unless something was terribly wrong...and since Norton Rome had a gun, “wrong” ranged from captured to killed.

The guys jumped out of the car and Pete grabbed his wire cutters from the trunk. They quickly scaled the concrete block wall at the place they’d entered before. Sure enough, the wire had been mended. Pete again cut through, and the guys landed softly on Oracle’s grassy lawn.

Suddenly a loud buzz saw sound sent shivers down their spines. They squatted in the deep shadow of the wall. Pete pressed a finger to his lips, signaling Bob not to speak. He gestured in the direction from which he figured the sound had come.

As the buzz saw roared again, the guys crab-walked along the wall, heading toward the noise. They darted across the grounds and pressed themselves flat against the warehouse.

Again the buzz saw exploded. It had to be just around the corner, Bob thought. Pete inched to the edge and peered around it. His back stiffened and then seemed to spasm. Quickly Bob yanked him back to safety. And then Bob realized Pete wasn’t hurt—he was soundlessly laughing!

Bob pushed past Pete. Some guy in a night watchman’s uniform had gone to sleep on a stool. His head drooped back over a railing, and his legs were spread out in front. A big white handkerchief covered his face.

Suddenly he snored. That was the terrible buzz saw sound! The white handkerchief blasted up and sank softly

down like a parachute.

As Bob bit back laughter, the two Investigators sprinted past.

“Look!” Pete nodded at the parking lot. “There’s my delivery van. Jupe is still here.”

Bob nodded, and they stopped at a warehouse door. They listened, heard nothing, and slipped inside. Carefully they watched shadows and looked for any sign of their friends. They padded toward the computer graphics department. They peered in the glass windows, but the room was dark and quiet. “No one here,” Bob whispered. “Wonder where Jupe and Branson are?”

“Yeah. And Rome!”

Thinking about Rome and his gun made the guys move even more carefully through the old office corridors. They listened at the closed office doors and then tried them, but all were locked.

The guys stared at each other, worried. There was no sound at all. The warehouse was deadly quiet.

They went upstairs, but Ek’s office was silent and locked, as were the other offices there. On the first floor the Matte Room, the Creature Room, and the Model Shop were dark and locked. The big rehearsal hall was empty. “Club Dead next?” Pete wondered. Bob nodded. “The only place we haven’t checked.” Again they listened at the door, then softly opened it. It creaked. Nervous that someone had heard, they surveyed Club Dead and the hall.

When no one jumped out at them, Pete took a deep breath. “Let’s hit it.”

The guys slipped through the doorway. The hall lights made a rectangle of yellow just inside the room. It was the only illumination on Club Dead’s exotic shapes. The Investigators split up and moved down the eerie aisles. They passed each other silently.

Then Bob turned quickly to avoid a floor robo-mouse. Suddenly soft hands seemed to wrap him in cobwebs. It made his hair stand on end! He struggled to free himself.

“Shhhh!” Pete warned as Bob thudded against more softness.

And then Bob was free! “Thanks!” he breathed. “What got me?”

Pete held up a Grim Speaker costume. “This. Looks like you pulled it down on yourself, dope.” He attached it back up to a guy wire that stretched across the room.

“Attack of the killer costume.” Bob gave a worried sigh. “That finishes me here. You find anything?”

“Nope,” Pete said grimly. “Looks like everyone’s disappeared into thin air!”

In a secret underground room, Jupe and Branson were tied roughly to metal folding chairs. They watched as Norton Rome slid a frozen pizza into his microwave oven and enthusiastically hit the ON button. Then Rome laughed and returned to a small kitchen table. He sat down.

“Money! Money! Money!” he chortled. “All mine!” He scooped a pile of thousand-dollar bills toward him and started counting. It was the blackmail money.

Branson’s face was white with fury as Rome bragged to them.

“Brannie, you and your friends are lousy tails,” Rome lectured arrogantly. “Never let your prey hear you. I was just coming into my secret room when I heard the door creak. That told me someone was entering the building. Then I connected the creaking to the cat outside. And that made me realize the cat sounded human after all.”

“You just got lucky, Nort,” Branson growled.

Jupe was too busy to be angry. Careful not to let Rome see him, he was twisting his arms against his ropes. Maybe he could get them loose enough to pull a hand free. Meanwhile, he needed to keep Rome distracted. So he sniffed the air. Rome’s Canadian bacon and pineapple pizza smelled delicious.

“I’ll bet you nuked a pizza earlier tonight, too,” Jupe said. “We smelled it upstairs.”

“Unfortunately, cooking odors have been a problem,” Rome agreed as he happily made stacks of his loot. “That’s why I was forced to, ah, borrow some of my former colleagues’ food.”

“You’re the one stealing the junk food!” Branson accused him.

Rome slid the pizza out onto a tray and carried it back to his table. “They’re such idiots they’ll never figure it out.”

“Stupid like me,” Branson said. “Right, Nort? Well, look at it this way—we found you!”

“True. But that’s rotten luck for you. You’re dead meat.” Norton Rome grinned.

Suddenly Jupe had a vision of him and Branson hanging limply from meat hooks. His stomach went hollow with fear, but he wasn’t going to let Rome see it.

“You’re a real zero, Brannie. You never could see farther than a computer screen.” Rome liked the sound of his own voice, Jupe decided. The blackmailer’s eyes gleamed as he gestured with a fistful of thousand-dollar bills at the huge underground room. “I accidentally stumbled onto this secret room, and it was perfect. Some bootlegger built it to hide his Prohibition booze. It was empty and forgotten, but I saw its potential.”

“This warehouse dates from the 1920s?” Jupe asked, hoping to keep Rome busy. That was when the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution had outlawed making and drinking liquor in the United States.

Rome looked at Jupe, but fortunately he couldn’t see that Jupe was trying to loosen the ropes that tied his arms in back.

“Yeah,” Rome said cockily. “The bootlegger did it right—ventilation shafts and even an old-fashioned toilet. Add a TV, microwave, computer, and tons of food. I am, if I do say so myself, in genius heaven.”

“A guy could live here for weeks,” Branson said.

“Exactly!” Rome said confidently.

“I get it,” Jupe said. “The one place no one would ever think of looking for a blackmailer would be in the place he was blackmailing!”

Norton Rome’s pudgy chest expanded with pride. “I’ll lie low here until everyone gives up looking for me.” He picked up a piece of hot pizza, and the mozzarella dripped onto the tabletop next to the money. “I’ll escape with my dough, and none of the suckers around here will ever figure out how I did it. I’ll be a hero!” He took a bite of pizza and chewed with relish.

“Heroes are admired,” Jupe said. “Everyone will hate you.”

“That’s not the point,” Rome said. “Once he gets the antidote, Silas will call in the cops, the Feds, the Coast Guard, everyone he can think of...and I’ll bet I’ll even be on TV and in the papers. I’ll be famous! The one who got away.” He eyed Jupe. “Too bad you’re such a snooper, kid. But when I saw you with Ek yesterday, I knew I had to get rid of you. Bull’s-eye instincts, right?”

Jupe shook his head. “Wrong. As long as we’re missing, Oracle won’t give up.”

Rome’s fat face turned bright red with anger. He slammed a fist down on the table. “Anyone who works at

Oracle's a scumball loser! All Oracle does is grind talent down to the lowest common denominator. Lousy pay! No recognition! I'm not going to take it anymore! They can whistle for their antidote!"

"You'll never get away with it," Jupe stated. His voice sounded certain, but inside he was deeply worried. He'd pretended to stumble when Rome had ordered him and Branson through the hidden door to the underground hideout. As he'd stumbled, he'd dropped the little model Qute had given him. Jupe hoped fervently Pete and Bob would spot the little statue and come to the rescue! But just then Norton Rome reached inside his leather jacket and pulled out the gunmetal-blue Walther pistol. He laid it on the table next to Jupe's walkie-talkie.

Rome smiled nastily. "You think somebody's going to save you? Forget it." He pointed to a red light bulb next to the staircase that led up to the door. "Anybody tries to get in, that red baby goes on."

Rome leaned over the table toward Jupe and Branson. His insane eyes glowed. "The only way you two'll leave here is in body bags." He laughed loudly. "If your corpses are ever even found!"

Pete and Bob split up to explore the warehouse one last time. Bob was getting more and more discouraged. It seemed as if Jupe and Branson had simply evaporated. There wasn't a trace of them anywhere. Bob was just heading out to the parking lot to check the delivery van for clues when he heard Pete's voice.

It was low and urgent. "Bob! Come here. I've found something weird!"

Bob spotted Pete in one of the old-fashioned, wood-paneled office corridors. He was kneeling, holding something in his hand.

"I found it here," Pete said, placing the likeness of Qute den Zorn on the floor on the other side of the arched alcove. "Do you suppose Qute dropped it yesterday?"

"Or maybe one of the publicity people had a box of them, and one fell out." Bob scratched his blond head. "Wonder why the cleaning staff didn't sweep it up."

"Doesn't make much sense," Pete agreed.

"Wait a minute! What about Jupe?"

"Yeah! He's been carrying his around since Qute gave it to him yesterday. I saw him looking at it this morning."

"Maybe he's trying to tell us he's here somewhere!" Bob

guessed, excited.

The guys prowled the corridor, listening at the doors and trying them again. But no luck. They wandered back to where Pete had found the tiny model.

“You don’t suppose...” Pete said slowly as he ran his hands tentatively over the wood paneling.

“A hidden door?” Bob said as he joined Pete. “Why not?”

The guys felt the wood and the little grooves where the planks met, but there were no buttons or latches. Bob squatted down where Pete had found the replica. He looked around, and then up. Suddenly he noticed that where the wall met the ceiling a piece of crown molding was slightly darker in color, as if hands had touched it many times.

Bob leaped up and pulled on the molding. It slid down, and there was a quiet whirring as the back wall of the alcove inched inward.

“Amazing!” Pete said softly.

The guys stood back against the wall on either side of the moving panel. As the alcove opened wider, Bob’s heart pounded with anticipation. Once the whole secret entrance was open, they jumped inside.

“There’s stairs going down!”

But suddenly Norton Rome appeared at the top of the staircase. He pointed a big Walther straight at Pete’s heart! “Looking for somebody?” he snarled.

Chapter 18

Taking a Byte out of Crime

PETE STOPPED SO SUDDENLY THAT BOB SLAMMED into him, shoving him straight toward pudgy, crazed Norton Rome. Pete reacted instantly. Instead of catching himself, he let himself crash on into Rome and knock aside Rome's aim.

Rome's gun exploded accidentally, blasting a huge hole in the wall. Splinters bit into Bob's face.

"Bob! Pete! We're here!" Jupe shouted from somewhere below.

Pete lunged once again for Rome. But Rome was a lot faster than he looked. He twisted away, which threw him off balance. It made him drop the gun.

"I'll get you!" he bellowed. "Just you wait!"

As Rome scrambled on the landing for his gun, Bob shouted, "Come on, Pete!"

They tore out of the alcove. They heard Rome's feet thunder after them.

As they pounded along the corridor Bob panted, "I've got an idea. Separate! You keep Rome busy in Club Dead. I'll double back and free Jupe and Branson!"

"You're on!"

They dashed into Club Dead, leaving the door open. Only the rectangle of hall light illuminated the vast, packed room. Pete raced down an aisle among props and models while Bob circled behind the big chrome robot next to the door.

"I know you're in here!" Rome bellowed as he stood in the doorway, his pudgy body trembling with rage. "You can't get away from me!" He ran down a different aisle from the one Pete had chosen.

Immediately Bob slipped back out the door and ran to the office corridor. He pulled down the molding, and the alcove panel swung open.

"Jupe!" he called as he took the steps down two at a time.

In Club Dead, Pete had kept ahead of Norton Rome for more than ten minutes, but now he was in trouble.

Rome was crazy, but he was smart, too. He was slowly herding Pete toward a far corner of the room. Pete slid in and out among the costumes and props, trying to circle back, but Rome had an uncanny ability to guess what Pete's next move would be.

"Where's your friend, kid?" Rome snarled at Pete as he closed in. "I'm going to get rid of both of you at the same time!"

Suddenly pink, yellow, and blue strobe lights whirled and danced across the room. Pete saw Rome lift his head, startled. Then the big screen high on the wall clicked on with a high-speed car race that seemed to extend across the entire room. Calliope music filled the air. Horns honked. Tires squealed. The metal mask shot out of its box. A foot-stomping Sousa march played.

Club Dead was chaos.

"Hel—l—l—l—o—o—o!" came a loud groaning voice that seemed as deep as the Earth itself.

Pete watched in awe as the Grim Speaker sailed through the air—straight at Norton Rome!

Confused already, Rome froze to the spot. His mouth fell open, and his glittering eyes grew huge.

"You must take care of the Earth and all who dwell on it!" the Grim Speaker intoned. "Because you have not, the Grim Speaker predicts doom for you, Norton Rome!"

And then right next to Rome, the Grim Speaker dropped from the high overhead wire on which he'd sailed across the room. Beneath the green costume Pete caught a flash of athletic shoes—Jupe's!

Instantly Pete raced toward Rome.

Bob bellowed, "Get him!"

They converged on Norton Rome at the same time. It was too much for his unstable personality. Like a fat, frightened puppy, Rome cringed back against a box labeled clay models. Quickly Pete grabbed his gun.

"Don't!" Rome cried. "Please don't hurt me!"

Branson shook his head at the pitiful sight of the pudgy programmer blubbering against the cardboard box. "I'll call the cops."

"Now tell us where the antidote is!" Jupe told Rome. "Oracle needs your antidote to kill the virus. Give it up now, and things will go easier for you!"

But Rome shook his head. "I want my money!"

"You'll never get the money now," Bob told him. "All

you're going to get is the slammer!"

"And they won't let you near a computer," Jupe promised. He pulled off the Grim Speaker costume and took a breath of air.

"I must have my computer!" Rome wailed. He wiped the back of his hand across his damp face. Suddenly a cunning look came into his eyes. "Let me go, and you can have the antidote!"

"No way, Jose!" Pete said, disgusted.

"The game's up!" Bob added.

"Not my game!" said Rome with a flash of his old arrogance.

"Game..." Jupe repeated. He pulled on his lower lip.

"What's up, Jupe?" Bob asked.

"The game disk!" Jupe said. "That's got to be it!"

"What?"

"You know the game disk Rome gave to my computer club?" When the guys nodded, Jupe went on. "Rome lives and breathes computers. Where else would he hide the antidote but somewhere connected to computers...like on a game disk!"

"That's nuts!" Rome said in an almost normal voice. But his eyes darted crazily around the room.

"Rome, you've really blown it this time," Jupe told him. "You thought you could store the antidote with my club, didn't you? You knew your apartment would be searched. But when you put the antidote on the game disk, you transferred your virus, too. The master game disk and our copies are all wiped clean, so the antidote is gone!"

Rome blinked. "So what?" he said in his old arrogant voice. "You think I haven't memorized it? I know exactly what to do to get rid of the virus."

Jupe took a pencil and a little notebook from his pocket and handed them to Rome. "I don't believe you!" he challenged the programmer. "Nobody's that smart. Prove it!"

Norton Rome lifted his eyebrows as if Jupe had the IQ of a Neanderthal. Quickly he scribbled numbers and symbols and handed the codes back to Jupe.

"There!" he said, cocky as ever. "I told you I memorized them. Every detail perfect."

Jupiter, Bob, and Pete looked at one another and grinned.

"You just made a fatal error!" said Jupe.

“Case closed,” Bob agreed.

“Let’s tie this creep up!” finished Pete.

The next afternoon was warm and sunny in Rocky Beach. Jupiter, Bob, and Pete were meeting Silas Ek in front of the movie theater where *Cosmic Trek* was playing.

“Why do you suppose Ek set this up?” Pete wondered as he parked his Aries in the theater lot.

“To give us more free movie tickets, probably,” Bob speculated. “You know, a kind of thank-you for nailing Rome and the antidote.”

“Too bad Kelly and Elizabeth aren’t answering their phones,” Pete said. “We could’ve leveled with them now.”

As they strode down the sidewalk Jupe stared ahead. “Hey, guys! Do you see what I see?”

“It’s Qute den Zorn,” Bob cried. “And Hack!”

Qute and Hack den Zorn, Silas Ek, and some pretty young woman none of the guys recognized were waiting on the sidewalk in front of the theater.

“Glad you could make it,” Silas Ek said as he shook hands with the Investigators. His face was no longer serious. Instead it was wreathed in an enormous smile. “I thought you’d like to know that Oracle has decided to go public with the entire crime, to help encourage other companies to refuse to pay off computer blackmailers. We’ve all got to support each other on this.”

“What about Rome?” Jupe asked.

“He’s undergoing psychiatric evaluation,” Ek said. “If he’s sane, he’ll go to trial on criminal charges.”

“And if he’s as crazy as we think he is?” asked Bob. “Then he’ll be locked up for treatment until he’s well enough to stand trial.” Silas Ek smiled at the young blonde standing next to him. “Now I’d like you to meet Thursday Thrane, Hack’s date. Keep your eyes on this talented young actress—she’s going to be very big some day!”

“She’s a natural for sword-and-laser films, guys,” Hack said proudly as he put an arm across Thursday Thrane’s shoulder. “She can sub for Qute when Qute’s in college.”

Qute grinned at Jupiter. “Hi, Jupe. I found a really neat fact. Want to hear?”

“Sure.” He grinned right back and unconsciously patted the likeness of her he still carried in his pocket.

“If you live in the United States, you spend more than seventy percent of your time indoors. That’s from *Science Digest*.”

“I believe it!” Jupe laughed. “And with any luck, Norton Rome’s now going to spend almost a hundred percent of his time indoors!”

“Right on!” Qute laughed too. “Silas told us what you dudes did. So we decided we should have a party to celebrate!” She leaned down and gave Jupe a kiss on the cheek.

“A party?” Pete and Bob asked Ek, while Jupe turned tomato-red.

Ek nodded. “Here they come.” Everyone looked down the street.

“Kelly?” Pete said, astounded.

“Elizabeth!” Bob called.

The girls trotted up to them, but their eyes were locked on Hack.

“You weren’t kidding, Mr. Ek,” Kelly said. “Hack den Zorn! Wow! I’m so thrilled to meet you, Hack!” She smiled happily up at him as they shook hands.

“I’ve seen all your pictures!” Elizabeth told the big star, shaking his hand in turn. And then she smiled at Bob. “Mr. Ek said everything you told us about having to break our dates was true.”

“We’re sorry we gave you such a hard time!” Kelly said. She squeezed his arm. “Forgive me?”

“You bet!” Pete said, grinning from ear to ear.

Silas Ek was having a great time. “After the movie, I’ll meet you at the bowling alley for hamburgers and all the lines you want to roll.” He turned to Jupiter. “Oh, by the way, Jupiter. I hope you won’t mind being Qute’s date!”

Just then there was a mighty woof. Everyone looked up the sidewalk as a giant black mutt galloped full speed toward them.

“Monster!” called a gray-haired woman in a turquoise sweat suit. “Come here, Monster! Come here! Please, Monster!”

As Monster barked again, Jupe grabbed Qute’s hand and dashed toward the theater entrance. But it was too late. Monster leaped up, knocking Jupe down, and pinned his shoulders to the sidewalk. Then he tenderly licked Jupe’s peanut-butter-scented face.

As everyone laughed, Qute leaned over Jupe and said very seriously, “I’m so glad you like dogs. I do too. I can only relate to animal lovers.”

As Bob and Pete pulled the friendly dog away from Jupe,

he sat up and said, “I think maybe I’ll get a puppy!”

Qute clapped and everyone laughed.

“And I’m going off peanut butter,” Jupe added. “The stuff is too dangerous. It’s burgers and shakes from now on!”

The End